

JAMES POTTER
AND THE MORRIGAN WEB

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BASED UPON THE CHARACTERS & WORLDS OF J.K. ROWLING

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PROLOGUE

A long, low boat pushed through the fog, accompanied only by the sloshing thump of the waves against its prow. No gulls followed the ship, or screeched their calls from the hidden shores. No sun shone through the caul of mist. Chilly silence lay over the leaden sea like a blanket.

Four figures stood on the foredeck of the ship, all wearing dark cloaks and hoods. The wind switched restlessly, tugging at the fabric. One of the figures, somewhat shorter and slighter than the rest, clapped a hand to his head to hold the hood up. The drab light revealed his face, young and tense, his dark hair matted down by the heavy cowl.

“How long does it take to get there?” he asked, keeping his voice unconsciously hushed.

“It changes depending on the tide,” the man next to him answered. “Just keep your cloak tight about you, James, and remember what I told you back at the pier.”

The young man, James, nodded, recalling his father’s instructions. He didn’t understand how it all worked, except that the cloaks were enchanted somehow. They shielded their wearers from the mysterious magic of the ship, which was powerful indeed. It was the only craft able to ply this uncharted region of the North Sea, for it was a ghost ship, cursed to repeat the same route endlessly, empty of occupants unless they wore the magical cloaks. If even one of the cloaks was removed from its wearer, the ship would sink like a stone, washing all of its occupants into the fathomless depths of the lake.

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James glanced back over the length of the boat. The wheelhouse was a small cabin amidships, elevated slightly against the fog. Its lamps were dark and broken. Inside, the ship's wheel turned ponderously, loosely, operated by no one. The deck creaked ominously as it rolled on the waves. James shuddered and turned back forward again, anxious for the passage—for the entire trip—to be over as soon as possible.

The largest of the robed figures stirred and lifted his bearded chin. "There," he said in a gruff voice.

James squinted ahead of the boat. A huge, blocky shape had begun to heave slowly out of the fog. It resolved into the silhouette of an enormous tower, flat-topped and almost entirely featureless. Its base descended into rocky cliffs and caves, plunging down into crashing waves. It was Azkaban, the most secure prison in the entire magical world. James knew the legends of the place. Some proclaimed that the prison's stony foundation was not an island at all, but a magically free floating mountain top, ripped from the shoulders of the Himalayas. Other legends told that the prison was not in the North Sea at all. They claimed that the Sea's mysterious fog hid a portal to an unplotable abyssal loch, bottomless and lost in time, whose depths were prowled by horrid leviathans from a forgotten age. There was even talk that the behemoths had magical gazes that could hypnotize people into jumping right into their gaping maws. James didn't quite believe the legends about the monstrous sea creatures, but he did avoid staring into the watery depths, just to be sure.

As the ghost ship neared the prison, a low sound echoed out over the waves: a dull rumble, like water in the depths of a stone throat. Beneath this sound, however, was something even worse—a sort of warbling, keening wail, rising and falling on the wind.

"All is well," the bearded man said, nodding toward a flickering green glow that suffused the fog at the tower's peak. "Relatively, speaking."

"I know what you mean, Titus," James' father agreed. Harry Potter lifted his face to the tower, letting the pale green light shine dimly on his face. His distinctive scar was barely visible beneath the sheaf of his still-unruly hair. "I'm always secretly surprised to see the brazier's green flames. I've never seen the beacon torch glow red for danger, but I can imagine it all too well every time I take this boat trip. This place may be necessary, but it certainly isn't pleasant."

“What *is* that *horrible* noise?” the fourth man asked. He had an American accent, and it had become even more noticeable as his nervousness increased. James glanced up at him and saw the man’s narrow prow of a nose flared in distaste. He held a wide-brimmed black hat under one arm and had a long black broom clutched beneath the other.

“The noise?” Harry answered, as if he himself hadn’t noticed it. “Oh, that’s just the sea washing through the caves. When the tide comes out, it creates quite a thunder. I hope it doesn’t bother you too much, Mr. Quizling.”

The American narrowed his eyes and pressed his lips together. He didn’t answer Harry’s question, but neither did he ask any more of his own. James was glad. He knew that the noises were not entirely due to the water in the caves. This was Azkaban, after all. Beneath the rumble and crash of the waves was the faint collective shriek of the Dementor pit, buried deep inside the prison’s rocky base. The Dementors were creatures of shadow, parasites that fed on human misery. They had once been the jailers of Azkaban, but had been deemed untrustworthy when they had sided with the Dark Lord Voldemort during his final days. As a result, they had long ago been cast into the lightless depths of Azkaban’s deepest pit, imprisoned forever and raving mad with hunger. Their keening, tortured wails sent a chill down James’ spine.

“I don’t understand why we couldn’t just Apparate directly to the prison,” Quizling said a little too loudly. “This seems ridiculously inefficient. As you may imagine, this is not at all how we do things in the States.”

“We cannot Apparate to the prison,” Titus Hardcastle answered with stony patience, “for the same reason that its prisoners cannot Apparate *out* of it. What you call inefficient, Mr. Quizling, we call secure.”

“It’s the fog, sir,” Harry added. “It is not a naturally occurring phenomenon, as you can imagine. It is of ancient magical origin, infused with all manner of hexes and jinxes. Any normal ship that attempted to navigate through it would find its compass useless and its rudder guiding itself. Any witch or wizard who attempted to Disapparate through the fog would find themselves reappearing right back where they started, or worse, in the depths of the lake itself. These may seem antiquated

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measures by your standards, Mr. Quizling, but they work very well. Escape from Azkaban is virtually unheard of.”

“But not *impossible*,” Quizling added, raising an eyebrow. “By contrast, there are magical prisons in America that have never been broken out of at all. And this without bottomless abyssal lochs, ghost ships and cursed fogs.”

Hardcastle squared his shoulders meaningfully. “See if you can say the same after fourteen hundred years,” he growled.

“We are nearly there,” Harry said.

A pall of cool air emanated from the huge tower as the boat hove toward its base, approaching a yawning black cave. The thunder of the waves became a subdued thrum as the boat entered the calmer waters of the cavern. Lanterns glowed on ancient iron buoys, nodding slightly as the ghost ship passed. After a minute, a stone pier came into view, lit by a single torch. As James peered at it, he saw that the torch was held aloft in the hand of a very thin wizard in heavy black robes. A badge glinted from a belt that crossed his chest and he seemed to be wearing a sort of metal helmet on his head.

“Names,” the wizard called out sternly, his voice echoing over the glassy water.

“Potter, Harry, and Hardcastle, Titus, aurors,” Harry called back immediately. “Potter, James, and Quizling, Monroe, witness and arbiter.”

The wizard on the pier did not respond, and James decided this was probably a good sign. The man was as skinny as a skeleton, but the fist that bore the upraised torch looked as large as a pineapple. Apart from a stern scowling chin, his face was shadowed beneath the helmet.

The ghost ship drifted sideways as it approached the pier, docking silently without the aid of rope or anchor. Wordlessly, the four occupants began to climb out.

Harry introduced the man on the pier. “This is Mr. Blunt, chief administrator of Azkaban.”

“Nice to meet you,” James said hesitantly. Quizling stepped past him, pushing back the hood of his cloak and jamming his wide-brimmed hat back onto his head.

“Mr. Blunt,” he said stiffly, jutting out his hand like a blade. “Greetings from the wizarding court of the United States of America.”

Blunt's eyes lowered to Quizling's outstretched hand, which he ignored. His gaze climbed slowly upward again, stopping on the broom beneath the man's left arm.

"I'm afraid you will need to check that and explain its presence, Mr. Quizling," Blunt said with cool courtesy. "All brooms, Portkeys, wands and any other magical paraphernalia must be declared at the perimeter. No brooms allowed within the tower proper, sir. I am sure I need not explain why."

Quizling lowered his hand and glanced aside at Harry, his face etched with annoyance. Seeing no help there, he looked back at Blunt and smiled frostily. "Fine. Of course. I am in rather a hurry, Mr. Blunt, thus I will be returning directly to my embassy once we are finished here. I trust it is safe to fly a broom through your fog, sir?"

Blunt shrugged noncommittally. "'Safe' isn't a term I'd use exactly, but yes, it is possible to navigate a broom through the fog. If you will just allow me, sir..."

Blunt held out his left arm while still holding the torch aloft in his right. Quizling sighed impatiently and handed over his broom. Blunt held the broom at arm's length, studying it critically, and finally nodded to himself. He turned toward the edge of the pier, hefted the broom over his shoulder like a spear, and deftly threw it out over the water.

"Hey!" Quizling shouted, waking echoes in the low cavern.

James listened for the splash of the broom in the dark water, but no sound came. Blunt smiled tightly to himself.

Harry said, "It's all right, Mr. Quizling. Your broom is quite safely stowed until our return." Turning to Blunt, he added, "Mr. Hardcastle and I vouch for our companions. None of us carries any other magic but our wands."

Blunt nodded slowly. "This way then. Keep your wands away at all times and do watch your step."

James walked between his father, in front, and Titus Hardcastle, behind. He could feel the cold darkness of the cavern pressing against him from all sides, and was quite glad when Blunt led the troop through a heavily locked door and into a more brightly lit curving stairway. Lanterns lined the way, glowing on the cracked stone walls. Even here, the lonely drip of water was a constant sound. The stairs were worn smooth and shiny with mist.

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As they ascended, James asked his father in a quiet voice, “So, like, is this the only way in here?”

Harry glanced back and nodded. “The tower was designed with only one entrance. Its walls are thirty feet thick all the way around, without a single window.”

James gulped. A sense of creeping claustrophobia squeezed his shoulders and throat, but his dad smiled back at him.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “This will be over before you know it, and we’ll be back home in Marble Arch. I’m proud of you for coming along.”

James nodded unenthusiastically. A week ago, when he’d first been asked about coming to Azkaban to identify the villain his father had captured, it had seemed like a rather exciting adventure. Albus had been dead jealous about it, thus James had, of course, agreed instantly. Now, climbing the narrow stairs into the throat of Azkaban itself, he would have gladly traded places with his brother.

He shivered to himself. “I just wish Zane and Ralph could have come along,” he muttered, hoping only his father would hear. “They were there too, you know, on the night of the Unveiling, back in New Amsterdam. They saw just as much as me.”

“Sorry James,” Harry answered quietly. “They’re still back in the States. It was hard enough for us to arrange for you to come along. If it was just the Ministry of Magic we were dealing with, things would be a bit easier.”

James knew what his father meant. The prisoner in question was an American, even though he’d been captured in London. By international law, a representative from the American wizarding court had to be present for any interrogation. Quizling, the American arbiter assigned to the prisoner’s case, had been reluctant even to allow James to accompany them. Fortunately, the Department of Ambassadorial Relations had been pressed to file a formal request with the International Magical Police, claiming that James’ recollections might provide essential insight into the prisoner’s guilt or innocence. They had agreed to the interrogation, on the grounds that Arbiter Quizling be allowed to cut it short at any time that he felt that his “client” was being unfairly condemned outside of a court of law.

The troop finally reached another door. It stood atop a short landing, framed on both sides by greenly glowing lanterns. The door was

no less than twenty feet high and comprised entirely of black metal, studded with rivets. There was no handle or lock as far as James could see. Blunt approached the door with his torch still held aloft. It crackled faintly, casting his skeletal shadow far up the wall on his left.

“Dad,” James whispered, watching raptly. “How does it even open? I don’t see any hinges or bolts or anythi—”

The words froze in his throat as Blunt neared the forbidding door. He did not stop when he reached it, but continued forward, and James feared for a moment that the little man might bounce right off the cold iron. Instead, Blunt’s torch flared bright green for a moment, bursting its light over the entire width and breadth of the door. In response, the studded iron rippled in the air, like something seen through a heat shimmer. As the torch’s green flames unfurled into darkness, the great door broke apart into curtains of smoke, which quickly vanished, revealing a cavernous entryway, heavy with shadowy depths.

“Intriguing,” Quizling admitted, tilting his head. “So the iron door was just a mirage of some kind.”

“Not exactly,” Harry said, following Blunt into the bowels of Azkaban proper. “The door is exactly as real as it looked. Mr. Blunt’s magical torchlight is the real mirage. It creates the illusion that we can pass through the impregnable door. And thus, we can.”

Quizling frowned skeptically. James suspected that his father’s answer was a much simplified version of the truth, but he didn’t really care about the actual Technomancy behind it all. *It’s all quantum*, as Zane surely would have said.

The main hall of Azkaban was surprisingly large. Monstrous pillars leapt upwards, each as thick as redwood trunks. Crouched atop the pillars were ancient stone gargoyles, their downturned faces scowling and their shoulders supporting the buttresses of lofty vaulted ceilings. The walls were nearly featureless, comprised entirely of rough, cracked stone. Lanterns lit the hall far too insufficiently for James’ taste, leaving enormous shadowy gaps in the echoing depths.

“Why’s there no hearth,” he shuddered, hugging himself.

“Because we are wizards,” Hardcastle answered quietly. “For us, hearths are more than light and warmth, they are a means of transport. Catch my meaning?”

“Oh,” James said, nodding his understanding. “Right. No hearth means no Floo Network. No easy way out.”

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As Blunt led them toward a distant archway, James' eyes grew accustomed to the dimness. He noticed other people in the massive hall, most dressed similarly to Blunt, but there were far fewer than he would have expected.

"Dad," he whispered, sidling up to his father. "Where's everybody at? I figured this place would be crawling with guards. For that matter, where's all the doors? This doesn't look like a prison at all."

Harry glanced at his son, his eyes serious behind his glasses. "It's like I said, son. There's only one way in. One way in, and one way out."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Harry opened his mouth to answer, but at that moment Blunt turned left, into a low hall. Harry, James, Hardcastle and Quizling followed him, and then stopped abruptly as they met a blank stone wall. James blinked and shaded his eyes against the room's sudden illumination. Bright lanterns were embedded into the walls behind thick glass blocks, all glowing with nearly painful whiteness.

Blunt approached the blank wall and produced his wand. He tapped the wall with it, and a series of intricate carvings began to unfurl onto the stone, emanating from the tip of Blunt's wand. The carvings, James noticed, formed the shape of a small door, surrounded by indecipherable symbols and shapes. With a scraping grate, the door swung open, revealing only a small, dark alcove. Deftly, Blunt lowered his torch toward the alcove. Its flame flickered and buffeted as if in the teeth of a sudden hard wind. Then, with a hollow *fwump* and a flash of green, the torchlight leapt from the end of Blunt's torch and into the alcove. There, the fire swirled and spun, forming a bright, flickering orb. Instantly, the stone door clapped shut over it.

"The entrance flame must stay hidden for the duration of any interaction with the prisoner," Blunt said gravely, turning back toward the troop. "From the time we open the cell tower until the moment it is secured again, we are as much prisoners here as the inmates. Is that understood?"

Everyone in the room nodded except Mr. Quizling.

"Can we please get on with it," he said, raising his eyebrows impatiently.

"May I have the prisoner requisition number?" Blunt asked, turning to Harry.

Harry nodded. There was an exchange of formal parchments, which Blunt peered at for barely a moment. Then, deftly, he turned back toward the stone wall. He tapped it once again with his wand. The etching of the elaborate stone door unfurled. The carved lines rearranged, flowed together, and formed the shape of a large frame. Within the frame were three numbers: 0-0-0. Blunt touched the first number with his wand.

“Six,” he said. The etchings that formed the first zero began to dissolve and swirl, reshaping into an ornate number six.

“Two,” Blunt said, tapping the second zero, and then, “Nine.”

The numbers resolved. They glowed faintly for a moment, pulsing purple in the bright white of the room. Then, the entire wall began to shift. With a grating rumble that James could feel in the soles of his feet and the pit of his stomach, the stone slid sideways, taking the etched frame and numbers with it. A moment later, a door slid into view. It was heavy iron, with a tiny barred window set into it. In the center of the door, the numbers 001 glowed bright purple. The door shuttled past as James watched.

Another door followed, moving slightly faster. This one had the number 002 emblazoned on its center.

James’ father leaned close to him. “Our man is rather near the top, I believe,” he said quietly.

James nodded speechlessly. The doors in the stone wall began to pass by with increasing speed. As they did, the rumbling grate rose in pitch. The floor seemed to thrum with the noise. James’ fancied he could feel his very eyeballs vibrating in their sockets. Soon enough, the doors were flickering past in a blur, their glowing numbers forming an indecipherable purple streak. James’ sensed that the doors were not just spinning past, but lowering slightly, as if the interior of the great tower was a sort of bolt, screwing itself into the depths of Azkaban’s foundation.

James waited for the doors to begin to slow, but they never did. He wanted to ask his father just how deep the cell tower could go, but knew that he probably wouldn’t be heard over the grating roar. Then, shockingly, the tower’s wall simply slammed to a halt. It clanged, stone on stone, so deafeningly that James clapped his hands to his ears. By the time he touched them, however, both the motion and the noise were over. Silence rang in the stale, bright light of the hall. Standing prosaically in

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the center of the stone wall was one last iron door. The purple numbers on its front read 6-2-9.

The door opened silently, swinging outward.

James peered into the cell beyond. It was quite small, barely as deep as the thin bed that lined the right wall. There was no window, and the stone that formed the cell walls was utterly seamless. James felt another twinge of claustrophobia just looking into the tiny space. Sitting against the rear wall on a straight-backed metal chair was a small man. He was thin, balding, and wore tiny rimless spectacles, with which he seemed to be reading a book. He did not look up.

“Inmate number six two nine,” Blunt announced stoically. “Identified as Ratimir Worlick, citizen of the United States, apprehended this twentieth of August in Peckham, England, charged with attempted manufacture and distribution of potions of warfare and dark magic.”

There was a long silence as the occupants of the viewing hall studied the man in the tiny cell. Worlick paid them no attention whatsoever. His eyes were magnified behind his spectacles as he stared down at the book in his hands. After a moment, he languidly licked one finger and turned a page. James noticed the title of the book, emblazoned in tarnished gold foil on black leather: POWERS of the BLACK ALCHEMIES.

“These are simply abominable conditions,” Quizling said flatly. “I demand to be granted a private interview with my client to ascertain his mental state.”

“His mental state is just fine,” Hardcastle commented through gritted teeth. “You might instead consider the mental state of the three aurors that were wounded during his apprehension. Of course, there’s only two of them left to interview now, seeing as Jakob died this last evening.”

“That’s enough, Titus,” Harry instructed, although James sensed that his father was holding back his own anger. James had eavesdropped on his parents as they had discussed the raid on Worlick’s laboratory. He hadn’t heard all the details, but he’d learned enough to know that the wizard had been concocting some seriously dangerous dark magic, and that he had murdered more than a few Muggles to get the ingredients he needed. He had very nearly escaped from his father’s raid, unleashing a vicious powdered curse upon the aurors to slow them down. James didn’t know what the curse had done, except that it had horribly wounded two

professional aurors, and killed one, Andrea Jakob, one of his father's best young recruits.

"Ratimir Worlick," Harry said loudly, addressing the small man in the cell. "Do you know who we are?"

Worlick finally looked up. His face was nearly expressionless. He blinked owlishly but said nothing.

"You are accused of crimes against Muggle and Magical humanity," Harry went on. "You are suspected to be involved with the Wizard's United Liberation Front, a known enemy of the Ministry of Magic and twelve other magical governing bodies. You may be tried on the charge of accomplice to murder for the death of American Senator Charles Hyde Filmore. These are your charges. Do you wish to invoke your right to formally admit or deny them?"

Worlick blinked at Harry Potter as if he were a rather interesting insect.

Quizling spoke up. "You don't have to answer that question, Mr. Worlick. I am Monroe Quizling, the Arbiter assigned to oversee your trial. You have received my official correspondence, I trust." As he finished speaking, he turned his gaze on Mr. Blunt, who nodded once.

Harry touched his son's shoulder. James could feel the heat of his father's anger through his fingertips.

"Make him stand up," he said to Blunt.

Blunt nodded again. He raised his wand and called sternly into the cell, "Stand up and approach the door. Place the book on the bed and keep your hands lowered."

Worlick looked at Blunt speculatively, and then sighed. He closed the book and laid it carefully on the ratty mattress next to him. A moment later, he stood and moved toward the open door of his cell.

"That's far enough," Blunt announced. Worlick stopped.

Harry lowered his voice and leaned close to his son. "This is it, James. Take a good hard look. Tell us the truth."

James nodded. He frowned at the small man opposite him. Worlick stood illuminated in the harsh light of the hall. James studied him furiously, trying hard to remember.

It was hopeless, of course. He had known it even when his father had first asked him to come to Azkaban with him to see if he could identify this odious man from that horrible night months earlier. It had come to be called the Night of the Unveiling. Everyone remembered it—

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it was the event that had, by any measure, completely changed the world—but for James the entire night was just an awful blur: the trip into the World Between the Worlds, the death of his cousin Lucy, the final portal into the twin cities of Muggle New York and Wizarding New Amsterdam, where Petra Morganstern, with the aid of her sister Izabella, had torn away the veil of secrecy that hid the one from the other. James culled through his memories as carefully as he could, trying to conjure every detail. Had this man, Worlick, been there anywhere? Was it possible? He seemed so small and weak. Could he have been one of the wizard assassins who had attempted to kill his father? They'd all been wearing cloaks, hiding their every feature. There was just no way to tell for sure.

“I...” James began, screwing up his face in concentration. “I can't quite...”

“The witness does not recall seeing my client,” Quizling stated firmly. “Let the record officially show—”

“Wait,” James interrupted. He leaned forward, peering at the small man in his grey Azkaban robe. The robe was ill-fitting, emblazoned with his prisoner number in black stitching. The sleeves were rather too short, showing the man's thin, pale forearms. His left arm was marked with a faded sigil, barely visible beneath the frayed sleeve.

“The tattoo on his arm,” James said, pointing. “I recognize it, I think.”

Quizling narrowed his eyes. “His tattoo, you say. Are you quite sure, young man? There were many thousands of people present on the Night of the Unveiling, most of whom were rather far away from you. If my client was among those allegedly preparing to attack your father's transportation, they were quite high up, out of the light of the street. I find it difficult to believe you could have seen a tattoo from that distance, in that light, much less be able to identify it now.”

James shook his head and glanced up at his father. “No, I don't recognize it from that night. I saw it earlier, when we first arrived in New Amsterdam. It was when we were on the train, the Lincoln Zephyr. Do you remember, Dad?”

Harry nodded. “Of course. We were attacked by members of the W. U. L. F. We were barely able to fight them off.”

“They were on brooms,” James clarified, speaking a bit louder. “They were wearing cloaks and masks, like they always do, but the wind

made their sleeves push up on their arms. One of them had a marking on his forearm, in the same place as the one on him, right there. I can just see it beneath his sleeve. Make him show it to us.”

“No,” Quizling countered quickly. “The boy is clearly inventing this story to falsely accuse Mr. Worlick. If he is so certain of what he saw, then let him describe the tattoo. If it matches that on my client’s arm, then his testimony may stand, not that it means anything conclusive. Many people have tattoos.”

Harry nodded reluctantly. “All right, then. James? I myself do not remember seeing any such markings on that night, so we must rely entirely on your recollection. Can you describe the tattoo you saw on our attacker’s arm?”

James held his breath, thinking hard. His memory of that night was a wild jumble of images-- the Zephyr leaping from its tracks, careening down a crowded New York street, flashes of wand-fire, shattering glass. He concentrated on the figures that had chased them, zooming over the train like hornets. He remembered the pale forearm, clutching onto a black broom. He’d barely registered the markings tattooed there at the time.

“Perhaps we should consider occlumency,” Titus suggested quietly. “You could do it yourself, Harry.”

“Not admissible,” Quizling stated. “The American wizarding court does not recognize the validity of memories obtained via such subjective means.”

“I remember it,” James said faintly. “I only saw it for a second, but... it was just a symbol. It looked sort of like a circle with a slash through the middle of it.”

As James finished speaking, he sensed a change in the atmosphere of the room. He glanced aside and saw Hardcastle looking at his father. They exchanged a meaningful look.

Blunt stepped forward once more. “Prisoner,” he called firmly. “Raise your left arm and draw back your sleeve.”

Worlick stared at James. He almost looked amused. Slowly, he raised his left arm so that his sleeve fell back. The tattoo was plainly visible in the bright light. It showed a calligraphic circle, cut in half by a tapered slash. The slash might have been a wand, or a dagger.

“The Phi of Balance,” Hardcastle stated, unsurprised.

“What’s it mean?” James asked, still frowning.

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“It is the universal marker of those who believe magical balance requires the extermination of all non-magical species,” Hardcastle explained in his gravelly voice. “They are murderers with no remorse. The worst of all villains, for they do not kill out of anger or revenge, but for their perverted concept of purity. They do not believe that those they kill are even human.”

“May I lower my arm now?” Worlick asked. It was the first time he had spoken, and James was surprised at the lazy indolence of the man’s tone. The look on his face was one of weary indulgence, as if he were humouring a gaggle of disagreeable children.

“Of course, Mr. Worlick,” Quizling answered. To the others, he said, “This means nothing, of course. Such tattoos are common enough among a certain class of revolutionaries. Most likely Mr. Worlick acquired the marking in his youth, not knowing what it even meant. Furthermore, it does not amount to proof that Mr. Worlick was among those who attacked you.”

“No,” Harry agreed. “I admit, he doesn’t strike me as the warrior type. Still, it is enough for us to detain him for trial. I am afraid Mr. Worlick will not be released to his home country anytime in the near future.”

Quizling accepted this grudgingly. “Be that as it may, I will require a private meeting with my client to instruct him of the upcoming proceedings. If you will excuse me.”

Quizling moved past the others, approaching the open cell door.

“You have five minutes, Arbiter,” Blunt announced. Quizling did not respond. He stepped into the cell as Worlick made room for him. The two sat down on the narrow bed and Quizling pulled the cell door to behind him, leaving it slightly ajar.

“Pompous fool,” Hardcastle grated under his breath. “Perhaps Worlick will save us some trouble and curse him somehow.”

Harry sighed. “Unlikely, Titus. Let’s try to be professional about this. At the very least, we got what we came for. Nice work, James.”

James nodded. “I really wasn’t very sure. I was grasping for straws.”

“Sometimes that is what it takes,” his father said.

“But dad,” James said, lowering his voice to a near whisper. “I really don’t think it *was* him on that night, when they attacked the train.

He's just too little and wiry. The man I saw was bigger. I can tell that even though he was wearing a robe and hood."

"I know, son," Harry agreed. "But this is good enough to keep him for now. Soon enough, we'll connect him to his network, the people he was working for. With any luck, we'll capture them as well, and they will all stay here in Azkaban for a long, long time. We have you to thank for that."

James shrugged. He wasn't sure that he had done anything especially difficult, but he hoped his father was right. Worlick was certainly evil, although not at all in the way that James had expected. Rather than vicious and vengeful, the man exuded a brand of detached hate that was so cold it was almost clinical. Here, James knew, was a wizard who felt absolutely no remorse or regret for what he had done. He would do it again, and worse, if he had the chance. Fortunately, he had been captured and imprisoned. And for now, he would stay that way.

Shortly, the cell door swung open again. Quizling stepped out, straightening his cloak and adjusting his arbiter's hat. Behind him, Worlick lay reclined on the mattress, only his feet visible, his black alchemy book held open on his stomach. The man's lazy indifference was truly creepy.

"Are you quite through?" Harry asked.

Quizling nodded in a businesslike manner. He huffed past James and the rest, striding purposefully into the darkness of the outer hall.

"It seems we are finished here," Hardcastle commented.

Blunt nodded. He flicked his wand toward the cell door, which slammed shut with a clang. Almost immediately, the door and the stone wall began to shuttle back the way they had come, accompanied by the rumbling roar of the cell tower. A minute later, the cycling doors shuddered to a halt once again, revealing the engraved stone wall. Blunt tapped the wall with his wand, unveiling the tiny stone door that safeguarded the entrance flame. He returned the flame to his torch and led James, Harry and Hardcastle back out into the main hall, where Quizling was waiting impatiently.

No one spoke during the return trip down the winding staircase. James followed his father again, with Hardcastle in the rear. Quizling stalked along next to Blunt, apparently fuming to himself and anxious to be on his way.

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Back in the watery cavern, the ghost ship was nowhere in sight. The lantern buoys bobbed silently in the darkness, painting their bright reflections onto the inky water.

“The ferry will return shortly,” Blunt explained. “Mr. Quizling, I will return your broom to you forthwith.”

Harry turned to Quizling in the darkness. “I assume you will instruct your embassy of what transpired here today. Can we expect no unnecessary interruptions as we proceed with Worlick’s trial?”

Quizling neither turned to Harry nor responded to his question. He merely stared out over the dark water, awaiting the return of his broom. Blunt stood at the edge of the pier and held both his wand and the entrance torch high overhead. He fired a single green flare toward the distant cavern ceiling. It painted moving shadows among the stalactites.

“Mr. Quizling?” Harry said, frowning slightly. “Is everything all right?”

Quizling still did not respond. Out of the darkness, a long dark shape lofted toward the pier. Blunt caught it deftly. It was, of course, Quizling’s broom. Blunt turned toward Quizling and held it out. Quizling’s arm jerked forward to grasp it.

James gasped. As Quizling reached forward, the sleeve of his cloak pulled back, revealing his forearm. A dark tattoo marked his skin. It was the Phi of Balance, the exact same one that James had seen minutes earlier on Worlick’s arm.

“Dad!” James called out, scrambling for his wand, but Quizling was too fast. He spun around, his own wand already in his fist, and fired a red bolt directly at Hardcastle, who was nearest. Hardcastle leapt to dodge the spell, which seared through his robes, barely missing him. An instant later, both Harry’s and Hardcastle’s wands were out and firing. Red light flickered throughout the cave, but Quizling was gone. The flap of his robes and whistle of his broom echoed over the water, along with a gust of mad laughter.

“Damn!” Hardcastle cried in fury. “He’s gone daft”

Harry shook his head, swiftly pocketing his wand. “Not daft,” he said. “Escaped.”

“But Quizling was no prisoner here,” Blunt said, scowling severely.

“James saw it a split second before I did,” Harry explained, shaking his head. “The tattoo, same as the one on Worlick’s arm. Quizling had no tattoo when we arrived here.”

James clutched his own wand, having not fired a single spell. “So how did it get there? Was he in league with Worlick the whole time?”

“No,” Harry said, turning toward Blunt. “They are not in league. And that was not Quizling. The man that just escaped had the same tattoo as Worlick because he *was* Worlick. Mr. Blunt, I trust that you keep a few brooms here for emergency use?”

“Indeed we do, Mr. Potter,” Blunt acknowledged quickly. “They are stowed right here, in the cavern.”

“We will require two of them,” Harry declared. “James, you will accompany Mr. Blunt back inside. Check Worlick’s cell and see what you find there. Hopefully Mr. Quizling is still alive. If so, James, accompany him back to land via the ferry. Understood?”

James straightened his back and nodded firmly. “Yes sir. Right away.”

Two brooms dropped out of the dark heights of the cave at Mr. Blunt’s summons. Harry and Hardcastle caught them. A moment later, the two aurors were in the air, preparing to give chase.

“We will meet you at the landward pier,” James’ father called back. “Be careful, James!”

James raised his voice as his father and Titus Hardcastle sped away, racing their reflection on the dark water. “I will! Don’t let him get away, Dad!”

But they were already gone, leaving nothing but cold silence and James’ worries in their wake.



When Blunt reopened cell door number 6-2-9, the interior scene had not changed. A figure still lay reclined on the bed with only its feet

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visible, the black book still held open on its chest. Blunt stepped forward carefully, wand raised, and peered in at the figure. A moment later, he lowered his wand and breathed a low oath.

From the outer hall, James asked tentatively, "Is it... Quizling?"

Blunt nodded. He leaned forward, out of James' sight. There was a white flash, and the reclining figure jerked suddenly, dropping the book.

"What!" a voice called out. "You can't do this! I am an arbiter! I--"

"Calm down, Mr. Quizling," Blunt ordered. "You've been Stunned, I shouldn't be surprised. You'll be fine in just a moment or two."

Quizling scrambled upright, flailing wildly against the confined stone walls. "I demand to know who did this to me! By what authority--"

"It was done under no authority," Blunt declared, over-riding him and turning and striding into the outer hall. "You may wish to know that this was the action of your 'client'. He traded identities with you, apparently using a polyjuice potion to change his appearance, although I cannot begin to imagine how he acquired it within these walls."

Quizling huffed as he followed Blunt out into the viewing hall. "Well. I'm sure there must be some reasonable cause for what has transpired here." He stopped and narrowed his eyes. "Surely you do not suspect that I myself assisted Mr. Worlick in any way. You do not believe that I smuggled any potions into these walls on his behalf?"

Blunt stopped. Without turning around, he sighed. "No, sir. I do not believe you have the capacity for such an act."

"You can be sure that I do not," Quizling nodded emphatically. "I am an arbiter of the Wizarding Court of the United States. Justice and objectivity are my watchwords. I--"

"You'll be needing a new cloak for the ferry, I assume," Blunt interrupted, walking on. "Your 'client' seems to have made off with your clothes."

Quizling stopped and glanced down, noticing for the first time that he no longer wore his ferry cloak or his official arbiter's robe and hat. His face pinched into a scowl. He glared at James.

"I assume your father and that overgrown grizzly bear companion of his are after Mr. Worlick?"

James nodded. "They'll catch him, too. They're the best."

Quizling nodded, his eyes still narrowed. "Then we have nothing to worry about, do we? Come along, my boy. Let's put this horrid place behind us."



The ghost ship arrived shortly after James, Quizling and Blunt returned to the pier. As Quizling preceded James aboard, Blunt gave James a severe look.

"You'll want to be careful, Mr. Potter," he said meaningfully. "There's a killer on the loose, assuming your father and Mr. Hardcastle have not yet found him."

"I wouldn't concern yourself, Mr. Blunt," Quizling called back. "I am Mr. Worlick's arbiter. Surely, if we encounter him, he will recognize that I am here to help him. We will not come to any harm."

Blunt glanced up toward the cavern ceiling, as if stifling a roll of his eyes. James nodded.

"Thank you, sir," he said as he climbed aboard the ghost ship. "We'll be careful."

A moment later, the ghost ship drifted silently away from the pier, drawing a thin wake on the glassy water. Blunt watched, his torch held aloft, as the ship glided toward the cavern mouth and the fog beyond. As the boat crept out into the open water, leaving the hulking tower behind, James turned and peered up at it. There was no longer a green glow atop Azkaban. Now, the beacon torch glowed red, for danger. Azkaban had been breached. A prisoner had escaped. Until Blunt had said something, it had not occurred to James that he might encounter the escaped madman before his Dad and Titus Hardcastle captured him again. He vowed to himself to be on high alert, keeping his wand clutched in his hand, buried in the deep pocket of his cloak.

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Wind switched overhead, whistling morosely in the ghost ship's old rigging. Choppy waves rolled beneath the hull, clapping at it and sending up clouds of cold spray. James peered ahead, anxious to be out of the fog, out of the reach of Azkaban's old magic.

"You're father and his friend," Quizling said after a time. "They are quite good at what they do, aren't they?"

James frowned at the man. "Well, yeah. My Dad's head auror. Titus Hardcastle is his best man. How do you think they caught that horrible twit Worlick to begin with?"

Quizling nodded and shrugged noncommittally. "I suppose you are right. Still, their methods leave something to be desired, don't you think? Allowing their fellows to be wounded and even killed, all just to apprehend a relatively harmless individual like Mr. Worlick. It all seems rather extreme, if you ask me."

"Yeah," James said, looking out over the grey waves. "Well, I don't expect anybody did."

Quizling smiled, then laughed lightly. "You think I am awful, don't you?"

James didn't answer. He studied the fog, waiting impatiently for it to clear up. It had been a lovely summer day before they had entered the North Sea's mists. He hoped that it still would be. He hoped that the sun would be shining and his father and Titus Hardcastle would be waiting for them at the landward pier, with Worlick safely in custody.

"You don't have to answer," Quizling went on. "I can see it on your face, James. You think I am nearly as bad as the man I represent, Mr. Worlick. Let me ask you a question, though, my boy. Do you really think things are as black and white as your father makes them appear? I submit to you that they are not. I submit to you that even Mr. Worlick is not the villain that you wish to believe he is."

James heartily wished the arbiter would just shut up. Without looking at him, he said, "I guess that's for the Wizengamot to decide. We'll just have to wait and see."

"Some people would not believe that Mr. Worlick was a villain at all. Some, you may be surprised to know, would go so far as to call him... a hero."

A cold shiver coursed down James' back. He turned back toward Quizling. The man was smiling at him. It was a pleasant smile, faint,

almost languid. James hadn't seen Quizling smile even once up to that moment.

"I don't know who those people are that'd think Worlick was a hero," James said. "But I know what a hero is. My dad's one."

"Ah yes, the Great Harry Potter," Quizling said, nodding and cinching his smile a bit wider. "It's a shame, really, that he chose to be on the wrong side of history. He really is a very remarkable man. It is a shame to see him... *waste* his talents."

James pulled his wand from his cloak. He didn't mean to point it at Quizling, merely to show it to the man, to let him know that James took what he said very seriously. Quizling had been waiting for James to act, however. His hand flashed out as James produced his wand. Within a second, the wand had been wrenched deftly from James' fist. Quizling held it up and smiled at it while James stood back, his eyes going wide.

Quizling's smile evaporated. "I'm sorry, James. I need a wand, you see. I do hope you won't mind."

As James backed further away, he noticed that Quizling's voice sounded different. It had grown higher, more nasally. Wind tore over the ghost ship and flapped the cloaks about both of their legs.

"You... you aren't Quizling," James said as realization flowed over him.

"Good for you," the man declared, brandishing James' wand. His face was changing now as well. Beneath the hood, the man's brow bulged. The hairline pushed back and thinned. The prow nose shortened and flattened. The thin lips grew fat and piggish. Within seconds, the man standing before him had changed from Quizling to Worlick.

"You are impressed with my cunning," Worlick said, "But you should not be. What is genius for you is mere everyday cleverness for me. I did indeed use a polyjuice potion to assume the appearance of my arribiter. Instead of immediately trading places with him, however, I Imperiused him, used his own wand to recreate my tattoo on his wrist, and sent him off to pretend to be me. I planned for him to lead your father and his lackey on a wild broom chase. Then, in the guise of poor, duped Mr Quizling, I was able to walk right out of my own prison cell, escorted by the warden himself. You may call it genius. I call it common problem-solving."

"I call it cowardly sneakiness," James spat, bumping up against the ship's gunwale.

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Quizling shrugged, advancing on him. “What is true of your father is also true of you, my boy,” he commented, looking at James over his own wand. “You, like your father, are on the wrong side of history. Those you have vilified will soon rise to ultimate power. True balance will be achieved when wizarding blood finally eradicates the lesser species. When that time comes, not only will we have the *power*...” he fingered James’ wand, pointing it at him and cocking his head. “We have the will... to *use* it.”

James was completely at a loss. Worlick was about to kill him, and using his own wand. He cast about the ship for a weapon of some kind, but the deck was entirely empty. Then, inspiration struck.

“You may have the power,” James called out, standing up straight and thrusting out his chin, “But let me just ask you one thing before you use it.”

Worlick rolled his eyes in bemusement. “Ask away, boy.”

“Do you,” James asked, yanking open his black outer cloak and letting the wind tear it out of his grasp, “know how to swim?”

The cloak whipped away, lofting out over the waves like a kite. Immediately, a bell rang out. James glanced aside, toward the ghost ship’s wheel house. The tarnished brass bell that hung on its side clanged clearly, sounding its alarm. With a monstrous groan the ship began to pitch forward. Waves thrashed up over the bow as the ship nosed into the leaden water.

“You complete idiot!” Worlick shouted, his eyes locked on the waves as they consumed the ship before him. “You’ll kill us both!”

James didn’t answer. He bolted sideways, ducking toward the stern and behind the wheelhouse. The angle of the ghost ship’s deck grew steeper by the second as it sank, pushing forward into the depths. A warped ladder was bolted to the rear wall of the wheel house. James clambered up this and fell forward onto the wheel house’s flat roof.

Below, Worlick seemed to have forgotten about him. He clung to the ship’s gunwale for dear life, backing away toward the stern as the bow plunged deeper and deeper into the hungry waves.

Unexpectedly, a beam of golden warmth washed over James where he crouched. He looked up and was surprised to see sunlight sparkling on the waves. Seagulls circled over the water. Beyond them, still faint with distance, was the shore. James fancied he could see the landward pier. Perhaps he could swim to it.

The ghost ship rumbled as water poured into it, weighing it down. It was nearly half submerged now and sinking very fast. It lolled sideways, threatening to spill James off the side of the roof and into the water.

A noise suddenly filled the air. It was so wide and pervasive that at first James thought it was a peal of distant thunder. He looked around, still clinging to the ghost ship's roof, and saw something that made his blood run cold.

A watery grey cyclone was spinning toward the sinking ship. It licked across the surface of the waves, leaving a foamy scarred wake behind it. It bore down on the ghost ship, dwarfing it under its writhing shadow. Wind and mist beat off the waterspout, stinging James' eyes. He feared that the cyclone would capture the ghost ship into itself, wrench it utterly from the waves and smash it to pieces within its terrible throat. Instead, the waterspout curled around the ship, turning it like a cork, and then began to slow. The spinning cyclone fell apart, raining water onto James and pattering the waves as if with a torrential rain. When the mist of the cyclone blew away, a woman stood in its place. James saw her standing amidst the waves, and his throat constricted into speechlessness.

"Greetings, James!" the woman called up to him. "I see you've gotten yourself into a bit of a pickle, haven't you?"

It was Judith, the Lady of the Lake. She smiled at him and shook her head, tossing her long red hair. She didn't even appear wet.

"I'd love to lend you a hand, but I am in a bit of a hurry. Thank you for accompanying Mr. Worlick this far. I suspect we will meet again soon enough."

The ghost ship let out a tortured groan. Water gurgled up over the roof of the wheelhouse, but the Lady of the Lake only laughed. She reached forward, and her arms became watery tentacles. They twined out over the waves, toward Worlick where he clung to the ghost ship's upraised stern. A moment later, with a gurgling scream, the man was engulfed in Judith's awful embrace. She pulled him back to her, and turned as if to leave. As she did, the cyclone sprang up again around her, whipping the sea into a frenzy and lashing cold, misty winds over James. He ducked, felt the ghost ship drop away beneath him, and found himself plunged into the cold darkness of the North Sea.

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Seconds later he thrashed to the surface, wandless, soaked, and completely lost. The cyclone was gone, as was the Lady of the Lake and her quarry, Ratimir Worlick.

James cursed aloud and smacked the water with his fists.

After a minute, for lack of any other course of action, he turned, lay flat in the water, and began to swim toward the shore. He wasn't even halfway there before his father and Titus Hardcastle found him on their brooms. By then, the sun was going down, a bank of low clouds had sprung up, and it had turned into a thoroughly, unabashedly horrid day.



The shot sounded so small in the cramped alley. It could have been a length of hickory wood being snapped in half, or a brick falling flat into a puddle. The sound of it—a flat *pop*, with no echo—barely registered in William's thoughts until the man across from him lowered and dropped his cane, then collapsed to his knees. The look on the horrible old man's face was not surprise, but affronted confusion. He opened his mouth, drew a shallow, halting breath. Before he could speak, however, his eyes went blank. He fell forward onto the brick pavement, dead.

Some distance behind him, the pistol still raised in her tiny fist, was a young woman. Her face was deathly pale, but composed. "For Fredericka," she said faintly, speaking to the dead man. "From her fiancé, William. And from me, her sister. Helen."

A ribbon of smoke snaked from the pistol's black eye. Jerkily, Helen lowered it.

William had been sure he'd been about to die, to join his beloved Fredericka in the afterlife, and had been ready to welcome that new reality. Now, instead, Fredericka's murderer lay dead among the trash, felled by a single unexpected gunshot. The villain, Magnussen, may have been powerful—he may even have had unearthly, mystical powers—but

he hadn't been powerful enough to stop an unseen bullet from knocking him clean into the next life. And whatever judgments awaited him there.

William approached the dead man, barely able to believe it was over. Helen joined him a moment later, shakily, the pistol stowed in the pocket of her apron.

Three young men appeared in the mouth of the alley, following Helen. William saw them, and for one brief moment he considered running away, taking Helen with him. After all, the alley had become the scene of a murder. They could both go to Hempstead prison for the rest of their lives. Still, something about the young men told William that they were not exactly surprised by what had happened, nor that they planning to whistle for a copper and scream bloody murder.

Faintly, Helen said, "These three say he stole something from them. They followed him here, hoping to get it back. They won't turn us in, I don't think. They just want their goods back."

William glanced up at them. The boy in the lead nodded seriously. He had unruly dark hair and looked to be about fourteen. Behind him was a bigger boy with a look of strained solemnity on his squarish face. The third was blonde, thin and wide eyed, staring down at the corpse.

William knelt next to Magnussen's body. The man's wicked cane was still clamped in his dead fist. The handle was made of iron, crafted to resemble the head of a leering gargoyle. Magnussen had used the cane to cast his unspeakable spells. William wrested it from the man's cold fingers, hating the weight of it, but wanting—needing—to break its power. He raised it in both fists and cracked it deftly over his knee, snapping it in two. The wooden shaft he tossed away, but the glinting metal head he peered at. It was horribly ugly, its gargoyle face leering malevolently. William lowered his gaze to the dead man again. A velvet drawstring bag was hooked over Magnussen's slab of a hand. He gestured toward it.

"Your stolen goods might not be the sort of thing that would fit in a velvet bag, would they?"

"Could be," the boy in the lead answered. He stepped forward, hesitated, and then dropped to one knee. He extracted the bag from the dead man's hand, which fell back to the pavers with a heavy thump. The boy stood, peered into the bag for a moment, then glanced back at his fellows and nodded gravely.

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“You three,” William said, “you’re like *him*. Ain’t you?” He gestured at the body again, using the hand that held the broken cane’s head.

The boy in the lead shook his head, but it was the larger boy who answered. “We’re sorry for what happened to Fredericka,” he said solemnly, with an unmistakable British accent. “This man may have been a part of our world... but we aren’t like him.”

William merely stared up at the three boys, measuring them. They knew about his poor, lost Fredericka. His cheeks burned. “I don’t know what’s in that velvet bag,” he said firmly, somberly, “and I’m sure I don’t want to. This is over. You go your way. And me and Helen, we’ll try to go ours. Fair enough?”

All three boys nodded. After a moment, they backed away, turned, and ran from the alley, taking their mysterious velvet bag with them.

William arose from his knees, and Helen leaned against him. He supported her with his left arm and she allowed him to collect her weight. She was trembling. He felt the hot weight of the pistol in her apron.

For the first time, he wondered how Helen had gotten to the alley. She lived with her family on the other side of the wharves, some fifteen blocks away. It was the middle of the night. William himself had been staking out the alley for weeks, hoping to catch Magnussen when and if he returned to the scene of poor Fredericka’s murder. Amazingly, the man *had* returned, just as bold as brass, walking as if he owned the whole street, or even the whole damn world. William had thought he’d been ready for him, but he had not been prepared for the man’s devilish, otherworldly powers.

But Helen had. She hadn’t wasted time on words. She had shot him dead, in cold blood.

But how had she known? How had she arrived in just the nick of time, pistol in hand, to kill the man responsible for her sister’s death? It was no small mystery. For now, however, there was no time to discuss it.

William dragged Magnussen’s body into the shadows and covered it with trash. He’d have to return later to dispose of the corpse. Fortunately, the riverfront was only a few blocks down the hill. The piers would be deserted at this hour. The murderer’s body might be found in the days to come, floating on the muddy river current, but then again maybe it wouldn’t. Either way, William didn’t care.

Silently, William walked Helen home. Neither spoke, despite the questions that hung in the air. For now, all that mattered was that it was over. Justice—at least the base version of it that was within their meager grasp—had been served. Whoever or whatever the awful old man had been, he was dead. Fredericka was avenged.

It didn't bring her back, and the two of them had to live forever with the stain of murder on their souls, but for now William thought he could live with that.

He just hoped Helen could too.



William married Helen less than a year later. Their courtship had been brief but intense, forged in the crucible of their shared experience on that fateful night. They learned that age old truth—that a mutual secret is one of the strongest intimacies, and their secret was indeed terrible and binding. They had both lost someone dear to them, and both had participated in avenging that dear one. In the years that followed, William never regretted what had happened, but he knew that Helen did, in her deepest heart. After all, it had been her hand that had held the pistol. She had ended another person's life. William wished it had been his finger on the trigger, just so that he could have spared Helen the responsibility. He was harder than her, and could have lived with it.

And yet, amazingly, they rarely spoke of it. It was the event that had brought them together, but as the years passed, it began to seem more like something that had happened in a dream. The only time it was ever fully real to William was on the rare sleepless night, when the world was quiet and the hours seemed endless. He would lie next to his wife and wonder: how had she known to come to the alley that night? Why had she walked those fifteen blocks with the pistol in her apron? How could

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she have arrived at that exact moment? She'd had to have left at least a quarter of an hour before Magnussen had even arrived in the alley. It was a deeply worrying mystery.

But William never did ask his wife how she had come to be in the alley that night, for one very simple reason: deep down, he really did not wish to know the answer. The answer, he suspected, might be even more worrying than the mystery.

Helen bore William four children. With the birth of their fourth—a son, to William's great joy—they had finally saved up enough money to move out of the dingy warren of the wharf neighbourhood. William quit his job on the docks and bought a small farmhouse just south of Philadelphia where, at the ripe old age of thirty-three, he took up farming.

There were lean years, and even in the best of times the family rarely had more than two dimes to rub together, but they were happy, and they were often rather fortunate. When neighbouring crops rotted in unusually wet springs, William's managed to survive. When foxes decimated nearby hen houses, their chickens remained untouched. When drought scorched other fields, William discovered a spring in a rocky glen on the corner of their property and used it to irrigate his crops.

It never occurred to him that these were unusual strokes of luck. Nor did it occur to him that they seemed to coincide with his wife's somewhat charming eccentricities. Helen had developed a habit of walking through the fields in the mornings, talking softly to herself, or singing funny, lilting songs. William never heard her actual words. He was content to see her from a distance, meandering in the dawn sunlight, singing and petting the young plants with the flats of her hands as she went. He knew that other people might think her slightly crazy, but he knew better. Helen was a gentle, whimsical soul, and the farm life had been very good for her. It had awakened something in her, and that awakening made William glad.

He never noticed that his soggy fields grew drier and healthier as she circled them each morning. Or that the colourful symbols she painted on the hen house might be more than senseless squiggles and interlocking patterns. Or that she had buried something in the rocky glen mere days before he discovered the spring there.

But her son did.

His name was Phillip. He'd been named after his grandfather, whom he had never known. He watched his mother carefully, as only a son can, both idolizing and studying her. He saw her circle the fields each morning, singing her funny little songs, but he knew that she wasn't singing to herself. She was singing to the plants as they pushed toward the sun, even to the dirt itself, encouraging and coaxing the fields in her lovely, simple voice. She made up the songs as she went. Phillip knew this because he sometimes followed her from a distance, watching with wide eyes, transfixed by his secretly magical mother.

His sisters didn't believe him when he tried to tell them about their mother's subtle magic. They were older and wiser than him, and reminded him of that at every opportunity. They laughed at him and scorned him and told him he was a silly baby. None of this dissuaded Phillip in the least. They were too old to recognize real magic, even if it lived in the same house with them.

One morning, Phillip saw his mother leave the house with a small tin box under her left arm and a garden trowel in her right hand. The dew was still beaded on the grass and the sun was barely a rose-tinted promise on the lip of the horizon. Phillip followed her, stealing along the edge of the east field, his bare feet swishing through the wet, tall grass.

His mother did not sing that morning. She walked silently, soberly, carrying the tin box and trowel almost as if they were a shield and sword. At the end of the east field, she turned left, toward the edge of the property. She didn't usually walk in that direction. After all, there was nothing over there but the border fence and an old stony glen, full of bushes and scraggly trees. Phillip hid behind a stand of weeds and watched as his mother descended into the glen. By the time she stopped, he could only see her head and shoulders. She looked down for a long moment, as if examining something, and then she knelt down. Phillip could not see her for nearly five minutes. When she reappeared again, she straightened her work dress and looked up at the sky. She was not smiling, but she seemed happy somehow, or at least content. A moment later, she turned and climbed back out of the glen, carrying only the trowel.

Phillip hid himself in the weeds and watched his mother pass. Still, she did not sing, as she did on most mornings. But she hummed. It was a quiet sound, and Phillip suspected that this time her tune was for herself alone.

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When he was sure she was most of the way back to the house, Phillip scrambled out of the weeds and dashed toward the glen. He followed his mother's steps as closely as he could, looking around intently. After only a moment, his sharp eyes spied what he was searching for. One of the stones had been moved, and the earth beneath it was disturbed. The boy knelt and pried the stone up with both hands. The sod under it was still broken and soft. Almost reverently, Phillip combed through the dirt with his fingers until he touched metal. His mother had buried the tin box. But why? Was she planting it somehow? Was it going to grow into something? What strange magic was she working down here in the glen?

He almost didn't open the tin box. What if he ruined the magic by peeking? Still, after a brief but fierce inner struggle, his curiosity won out. He brushed off the box, leaving it in its shallow grave, and then carefully pried off the lid. His eyes widened slowly.

The morning light poured into the tin box, lighting its contents brightly. There were two things inside, both made of metal. One was a pistol. It looked snubby and wicked, black with oil and tarnish.

The other was the head of an old cane, sculpted of iron, shaped like a leering gargoyle's face. It seemed to stare up at him, coaxing him to pick it up, to hold its heaviness and run his fingers over its complex features.

Phillip did not pick it up. He sensed there was something wrong with it, something that might make it even more dangerous than the pistol. The cane's head was magic, and the magic was alive.

The boy buried the tin box again, and ran back to the house. He had resisted the call of the evil iron cane. But he remembered it.

And it remembered him.



New Amsterdam was not entirely empty, despite appearances, and neither was the city of Muggle Manhattan that lay below it. Certainly, the great majority of the twin cities' inhabitants had fled in the wake of the Unveiling (or, as the Muggle press had begun to call it, The Event), but there are always a certain number of people either too embedded, too opportunistic, or simply too forgettable to come under the jurisdiction of such things as curfews, quarantine zones, and evacuation orders.

All pathways onto the island were blockaded and guarded by military police. In the heart of the city, the deserted streets lay choked with cars, taxis and buses, all stalled in place like a great river of metal. The Lincoln tunnel was almost entirely blocked by a massive accident that had occurred during The Event. Dozens of vehicles had crumpled behind an overturned bus, forming a wall of twisted metal and gasoline-scented debris. In Times Square, yellow cabs and delivery trucks sat silent, collecting dust beneath acres of dark neon. Over this, the magical signage of New Amsterdam stood equally dormant, most still hovering in place, but unlit and eerily still. The giant clockwork woman still held up her car-sized tin of Wymnot's Wand Polish, but her gears no longer cranked and her teeth no longer flashed. A nest of robins chirped and fluttered on her shoulder.

The great economic engine of Wall Street lay dormant and locked, its doors barricaded with concrete traffic dividers and razor wire. Above this, the Global Magical Monetary Exchange building stood wrapped in black iron chains, secured with a humunculous padlock the size of a grand piano.

The transparent skyscraper known as the Crystal City, former headquarters of the wizarding administration of the United States, stood empty, protected with its own magical failsafes and perimeter hexes.

On Chambers' Street, the hole where the Chrysler Building had once stood was partially filled with rain puddles. The police tape which had surrounded it had mostly blown away. Ribbons of it lay plastered to the street like dead yellow snakes.

The posters on Broadway had begun to fade and peel. Most of the letters had blown off the marquee of the Imperial Theater, leaving only meaningless riddles. The magical theater district of New Amsterdam, situated one block away and twelve blocks above, was cluttered with trash and programs, abandoned by fleeing audiences on the

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Night of the Unveiling. The grand façade of the Moxy Mage still glowed with its magical light, its signs flashing over empty bridges and archways: *IN ITS TWELFTH WEEK: BLAISE LUCE'S* production of *THE TRIUMVIRATE!* "A *TRIPLE TRIUMPH*" raves The Prognosticator. BOX SEATS STILL AVAILABLE!

All over the twin cities, weeds had sprouted in the cracks of the sidewalks. Vines twined slowly over doorways. Dead leaves collected in corners. Pigeons roosted on awnings and footbridges.

The cities' few remaining denizens moved stealthily through this, hiding in the shadows, flitting like ghosts.

"Maybe he won't even know," a figure rasped, hunkering in the twilight shadow of a city bus. "He can't know everything, can he?"

The speaker was a man, overweight and bearded, dressed in layers of colorless clothing and a threadbare New York Yankees baseball cap. He wheezed for a moment, his face sheened with sweat. Another figure moved next to him: a young woman with frizzy white-blonde hair cut so short that she looked, in her current state, rather like a dandelion. She was skinny and quick, moving with the practiced stealth of a long-time street person. She pressed her lips together, her eyes darting around at the deserted buildings.

"He can't know everything, can he?" the fat man wheezed, repeating his question.

"I dunno, Park," the woman answered under her breath. "He knows a lot."

"But not everything," Park insisted ardently, hopefully. "You'll cover for me, won't you, Lissa? You gotta. We been friends ever since the Event. I looked out for you. You just gotta cover for me."

Lissa nodded distractedly. "Sun's going down over the buildings. Come on, it's almost dark."

Quietly, the two crept out of the gloom of the bus and stole along the street, past empty storefronts and dark newsstands. The Heraldium Hotel stood at the end of the block, facing them, staring severely down the length of the avenue like a patriarch at the head of a monstrous, disheveled dinner table. The hotel looked as dark as the rest of the city, but Lissa knew that was because of the hex. Until six weeks ago, she hadn't believed in such things as hexes. At twenty-four, she had been officially homeless for three years, and life on the streets of Manhattan did not lead one to believe much in magic. Unless you were crazy. Lissa had

met more than a few crazies under the overpasses and bridges, in the unofficial homeless communities of the New York underground. The crazies lived in their own little worlds of conspiracies and delusions, and magic was often a part of that. When the Event happened, the crazies turned out to be the best equipped to handle it. Where the rest of the city had stood frozen in fear, shocked senseless by the sight of the magical city that had suddenly appeared above them, the crazies had merely looked up, nodded to themselves, and accepted this new reality as one accepts the dawning of a new day.

Lissa was not crazy, but she was eminently practical. She had followed the crazies (who no longer seemed quite so crazy, of course) and did what they did. After the Big Sleep, when the rest of the city had awoken in panic and fled, Lissa and Park had emerged into the suddenly empty city like survivors of a bomb blast. Eventually, they had encountered others. Stragglers and dregs trickled up from their hiding places, examining the empty buildings, collecting into small groups and bands. For a week, Lissa and Park had joined six others, roaming the streets and testing the locks on the storefronts. Most were shut tight, but a few had been left unlocked, probably abandoned by employees too shocked by the Event to think about the security of their jobs. Lissa and her new friends raided these establishments as needed, taking food and clothing, generally living better than they had in years.

It never occurred to Lissa that they were stealing. As far as she knew, the end of the world had come. Ownership had become obsolete.

Occasionally, the streets would rumble with the sounds of military vehicles. Great armored trucks with tank treads on their wheels and huge steel plows on their fronts would lumber along the mostly clear sidewalks, knocking aside anything in their paths. When the trucks came, Lissa and her crew would hide, quickly and silently. They were good at hiding, and soon enough the vehicles would rumble on, leaving scratched tracks on the sidewalks and smashed awnings and parking meters in their wakes. Coins glittered on the pavement, spilled from the broken meters, but no one bothered to pick them up. Money had become obsolete as well.

At the beginning of the second week, Lissa and her crew had discovered the Heraldium Hotel.

They'd seen it hundreds of times before, of course, but never really noticed it. It was just one more grand hotel, frequented by the sort

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of rich people who arrived in long limousines and were ushered into the front doors by men in natty red coats and hats. For Lissa, the place was simply not a part of her world. But suddenly, on the dawn of the second Monday after the Big Sleep, as Lissa and her troop turned the corner onto Lexington, the Heraldium commanded their attention like a monstrous beacon, fifty stories tall and glowing in the sunrise. Its windows glittered like molten copper. Its grand front awning spread over pristine marble steps. For the first time, there were no doormen in red coats to shoo them away. Now there were just the massive glass and brass revolving doors, completely unguarded and eerily welcoming. The doors were turning slowly, making the morning sunlight flash from their immaculate surfaces.

Lissa and her troop had gone inside without a word. She barely remembered it. At one moment, she had been standing on the corner of Lexington and Thirtieth, staring up at the imposingly regal hotel, mesmerized by its flashing, turning doors. In the next moment, she was inside its plush lobby, surrounded by potted ferns and low, upholstered chairs. A shiny black piano stood near the elevators, playing all by itself.

A voice had greeted them.

That was how they had met the Collector. He had welcomed them, and introduced them to his new reality. He had promised to explain everything. He had told them of his grand plan, and their very important part in it, if they chose to accept it. And of course they had. After all, no one else had ever needed the likes of Lissa and her crew before, or invited them into their counsel. No one else had ever told them they were important.

Now, stealing through the gathering gloom toward the false dark of the Heraldium Hotel with Park wheezing at her side, Lissa felt a subtle thrill of apprehension. After all, what did they really know about their mysterious benefactor? He called himself a wizard, one of those who had lived in the hidden magical city until the Event had revealed it to everyone. He certainly had wizard-like powers. His magic kept the lights and life of the Heraldium Hotel hidden from those on the outside. He could levitate things—even people—and shoot magical bolts of light from his wand. He presented himself as benevolent, but Lissa had begun to suspect that he was anything but. The Collector was dangerous, and all the more so because he pretended to be their friend.

But worst of all was his appearance, what they could see of it. He wore a long, burgundy robe at all times, its cuffs decorated with golden

scrollwork and its hood raised so that his face was almost entirely hidden in shadow. His hands were the only parts of his body that were ever visible. They were very white, very thin, with prominent knuckles and tendons. The Collector's hands looked strong, despite their thinness. The left always clutched a wand, very black and twisted, as if it were a charcoal cinder. There was a tattoo on the inside of the left wrist. Lissa had glimpsed it on a few occasions, and shuddered at it, not because she knew what it meant, but because she didn't.

The Heraldium loomed over Lissa and Park as they approached it. It looked different now, although Lissa didn't know if that was because the hotel had altered in any real way, or if it was just her imagination. The gargoyles at the corners of the roof seemed larger and more vicious than before, as if they were no longer mere statues, but living stone creatures, watching down with hawk-like eyes. The hotel's baroque stonework seemed more gothic than ever, spreading around the windows and ledges like petrified ivy. The entire building almost seemed to lean forward, to loom over the street like a monstrous vulture, preparing to pounce on the city below.

"I hate this part," Park gasped to himself as they neared the hotel's marble steps. "It makes my guts hurt."

Lissa knew what Park meant. Passing through the Heraldium's magical boundary was distinctly unpleasant. She steeled herself, and then lunged forward, under the burgundy canopy of the front doors. There was a sickening, rippling sensation that passed through her entire body, leaving a wave of nausea behind. A second later, however, the feeling passed. She stole up the marble steps quickly, toward the sudden happy glare of the revolving doors. Park followed, muttering worriedly to himself.

The lobby was brilliantly lit. Real candles glowed by the hundred in the crystal chandeliers. The piano played lusciously, hugely, its keys forming waves up and down the keyboard. Without a word, Park and Lissa passed this, entering the shadows of a side corridor. Double doors lined the right wall, all of them closed except for the last, which were propped wide open, letting out a glow and an eerie silence. A black sign stood on a post outside the doors, festooned with white letters that read: WELCOME TO THE NEW WORLD.

As quietly as possible, Lissa and Park entered.

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The banquet room was long and high, dimly lit by more crystal chandeliers. Tables and chairs had once filled the floor, but these were now pushed aside, overturned along the walls. Now, the floor was filled with kneeling figures, their heads mostly bowed. Most of the gathering represented the remnant of New York's street population, but there were a few who stood out as neither homeless nor typical New Yorkers. These individuals wore strangely old fashioned clothing, including waistcoats and watch-chains, cloaks and even a few impressive-looking robes. Lissa guessed that these people had been denizens of the magical city, New Amsterdam, although why they had remained behind was a mystery. Most of them seemed quietly terrified of the Collector, who stalked even now among the ranks, slowly and purposefully.

Occasionally, a hand would rise up from the crowd of kneeling people, offering something to the Collector. He would approach slowly and study the proffered items. Most of the time, he merely shook his head and moved on. Occasionally, he would accept the item with a nod, perhaps murmuring his approval, and slip it into his burgundy robes.

"Spynuswort root powder," he might say, "but not nearly enough. Collect more if you wish to gain my favor," or "These are false emeralds, but they are not quite useless. Bring me the real thing tomorrow. Try the alchemist's offices above Tiffany's," or "are there more of these dragon claws in the potion closet where this came from? Collect them on the morrow, but do not touch them with your bare hands lest they poison you before you can deliver them to me."

Eventually, he wound his way to the front of the room, where a small dais stood. He stepped onto it and turned toward the kneeling crowd.

"We have collected much, my friends," he said in a smooth, silky voice. "But there is much still that we need. The Warlock relies on us to provide his tools, and provide we must. Patience and diligence will lead us to victory, and when that day comes I will not forget you. You will accompany me, and I will care for you, just as I have from the day you first came to me. You were lost and hopeless, barely a step above the rats of the sewers, but I have elevated you. I have given you purpose. You are my people, and I will not forget you in the time of our Ascendance. But this honor does not come without a price. I do require your strict obedience. My rules are few, but they must not be broken, not even in the tiniest of ways."

Park and Lissa had knelt in a back corner, hoping not to be noticed. Park shivered with fear.

“But some of you feel you must test my resolve,” the Collector said, lowering his voice to a subtle purr. “I do not wish to prove the severity of such disobedience, but you leave me no option. Mr. Park.”

Park leapt to his feet next to Lissa, gasping and dropping his Yankees cap. It flopped to the floor at his feet, upside down. Lissa stared at it, afraid to look up. She didn’t want to watch, but she also felt guilty. After all, it had been partly her fault. Park had the mentality of a child, despite his age. She hadn’t been watching him close enough, and he had let his hunger get the better of him.

“Mr. Park,” the Collector said, his voice like oil, “will you please join me at the front of the hall?”

Park shook his head violently, but he began to walk forward anyway. He didn’t move around the perimeter of the kneeling figures, but shoved through them, pushing people aside right and left. Those he pushed did not protest or even look up as he passed.

Lissa considered calling out, telling the Collector that it had been partially her fault, that she hadn’t been watching out for him, that he was barely a child in his mind and couldn’t really be responsible for his actions. Park had asked her to cover for him. She knew she should, but she also knew it would do no good. It would merely extend the punishment to her, without saving Park from anything at all. After all, despite what the Collector said, he *liked* inflicting punishment. He looked for every reason and excuse to do it.

“My friend,” the Collector hissed as Park stumbled to his knees in front of the dais. “You have been a disobedient boy, haven’t you?”

Park cowered, chin to his chest, shivering. He nodded.

“You broke a window,” the Collector went on in a velvety voice. “You stole food. You collected for yourself, and not for the benefit of the community. You were selfish, weren’t you, Mr. Park?”

Park nodded again, violently, and Lissa could hear his breathing, short and harsh.

The Collector raised his voice and said, “What, my people, is rule number one?”

The entire kneeling crowd responded at once, in perfect unison: “We must collect only what is unguarded. We must collect only for the community. We must not steal for our own selfish gain.” Lissa was

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dismayed to hear her own voice among the crowd, repeating the well-known mantra.

The Collector nodded, relishing the sound of the voices. “Yes. And do you know why this is such a very important rule, Mr. Park?”

Park nodded again, but the Collector ignored him. He stepped down the dais as he said, “Because if we break the rule, just as you broke the window of that shop, Mr. Park, then we attract the attention of the oppressors. They will come in their rumbling trucks and flying propeller machines, and they will seek us out. They will find us here. They will imprison you and your friends for thieves. Do you not see, Mr. Park? My rules are here to protect you, to keep you safe. Do I not feed you each night? Do I not provide you beds to sleep in? Do I not give you the benefit of a mission? Why do you threaten all of your friends, and spit in the face of my charity, for a meal of half-spoiled meat and stale bread?”

“I was hungry,” Park sobbed. “I’m bigger than a lot of the others. I need to eat more. I was really, really hungry. Forgive me! I won’t do it again. Promise!”

“I am sorry, Mr. Park,” the Collector breathed, and his voice hissed throughout the entire assembly, magically amplified and echoing in the hall’s dark ceilings. “But I cannot grant you forgiveness. There can be no infraction without punishment. For your sake, as well as those who watch. Put out your hands, Mr. Park.”

The monstrous wizard was enjoying it. Lissa heard it in the very timber of his voice. He was a sadist, preying on the weakest of them all. Lissa knew she should say something. Park had begged her to protect him. It had only been an old pastrami sandwich in a deli case, still wrapped in white paper. Lissa had considered breaking into the market for it herself. After all, the Collector barely fed them enough to keep them alive. All of them lived in a state of constant hunger, made dependent upon the wizard’s meager provision. Instead, she had left Park by the market, climbing the fire escape to search the wizarding apartments above, and Park had done what she should have known he would do. He’d broken the window with a smashed parking meter and eaten most of the sandwich by the time she had gotten back. The look of abject guilt on his face would have been funny under any other circumstance.

Kneeling in front of the dais, Park shook his head briskly, making his curly hair flop about his head.

“Do not add disobedience to disobedience, Mr. Park,” the Collector admonished luxuriously, approaching the man, raising his wand, point down. “Put out your hands.”

Lissa stirred. She pressed her lips together and raised her head. She knew she had to say something. Self-preservation was a hard instinct to overcome for someone who had lived so long on the street, but she couldn't bear to see her companion tortured. She stared furiously at the scene as it unfolded in the dimness of the dais. Park was shivering visibly, cowering on his knees, refusing to put out his hands. *Just do it, Park!* Lissa wanted to call out, *all he's going to do is brand you with his wand! It'll hurt, yeah, but you'll live! Can't you see that he wants you to disobey him? He wants to hurt you even more! He likes it!*

“Now, Mr. Park,” the Collector ordered, still speaking smoothly, silkily.

Park whimpered, refusing to obey. Lissa opened her mouth to call out. She didn't even know quite what she was going to say. Before she could speak, however, Park raised his own head. He looked the Collector straight in the eye and said, so loudly and firmly that the room echoed with his voice, “No, you!”

There was a collective gasp throughout the entire hall. A few heads looked up. Park drew a deep, quick breath and pointed at the Collector. “I *won't* obey you! You—you're just a big bully! And you're *mean!* Before you came to us, yeah, we had to find stuff to eat on the street, and beg for money and stuff, and maybe that wasn't so great, but we were way better off then than we are with *you* around! You're no friend! You're a bad guy! You treat us like slaves and pretend that you're all nice, but you aren't! I wish I was back on the street again! At least then I was free!”

Park finished this uncharacteristically long speech and the room fell eerily quiet. Even the piano in the front lobby had stopped playing. There was a long, awful silence. The Collector merely stared down at Park, his face grave and strangely sad. Finally, slowly, he drew a deep breath and lowered his wand.

“You wish to be back out on the street, Mr. Park? At the mercy of destiny, with no one to care for you? Is that what you truly desire?”

Park's face was contorted into a mask of stern terror. He nodded once, quickly.

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The Collector sighed sadly. “Well, my friend. There is the door.” He nodded toward the end of the hall.

Thick silence filled the room, so perfect that Lissa, at the back of the hall, could hear the rustle of Park’s clothing as he scrambled to his feet. He turned. Nearly every head in the room was raised now, watching, wide eyed with disbelief.

Park began to walk toward the open double doors.

“Park!” Lissa called out suddenly, “No!”

But it was too late. The Collector had raised his wand the moment Park had turned his back.

There was an awful scream, eerily screeching and birdlike. It was the mingling noise of Park and the Collector, both crying out, one in anguish, the other in delight. Park collapsed to his knees as a jet of red light engulfed him, crackling and twining over his entire body. The Collector approached him from behind, wand out, casting the horrible tentacle of light. For the first time, Lissa saw his full face, lit by the light of his spell. His mouth was wide open, as were his eyes, which were wild with relish, showing the whites all the way around his pupils. Park’s and the Collector’s screams mingled, ululating throughout the hall, a chorus of horror and black glee.

Most of those gathered looked away, dropping their eyes, dipping their chins to their chests, but Lissa watched. She couldn’t move. Her own mouth was still open, her breath stuck in her chest.

Park fell forward flat onto his face, his arms limp. And still the Collector approached him, tormenting the fallen man with the evil red spell. Park was dead. Lissa knew it. The Collector did, too. She could see it in the delight of his open, toothy grin, his wild, bulging eyes.

And then, finally, the red light vanished. The room fell silent again. Lissa’s retinas were burnt with the after-image of the spell, so that the figure of the Collector was merely a black shape in the dimness.

“There,” the awful, velvety voice breathed, spent and panting. “Now Mr. Park has been collected forever. Does anyone else... wish to join him?”



It had been a very strange and unpleasant few months for the President of the United States.

Hal Drummond was a career politician, and he knew it, even if he was loath to admit it out loud. There was simply no way to become president anymore without fully immersing one's self into the occasionally grimy world of politics, utterly and without abandon. Drummond had put in his years, first as a state representative, then as a governor, and finally as a senator, all the while keeping his eye on the ultimate prize of the highest office in the land. Even more difficult had been the management of public perception. He had to maintain the illusion that his marriage (unhappy) was perfect, that his children (rebellious and sullen) were ideal, and that his record (sullied with all the seemingly necessary bribes, kickbacks and backroom deals) was spotless. It took a special kind of person to wade through the Washington swamp and still come out smelling clean on the other side, but Drummond (so he regularly told himself) was just that sort of person. He had won the presidency on a wide margin, boosted by the public's extreme dislike of his predecessor. All had gone relatively well. The congress and the senate were stymied by partisan gridlock, which allowed Drummond to occupy the moral high ground while not accomplishing much of anything. All was more or less well with the world.

Until Memorial Day, three months earlier.

Drummond had been in a late meeting at the time. Three members of his cabinet had been with him in the White House conference room, and they had just requested that dinner be brought to them there. They had been discussing the upcoming election. It was still over a year away, but election season started very early in the age of the twenty-four hour news cycle. Drummond was determined to stay in office for a second term, despite an intimidating new flock of political

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rivals. One of them, fortunately, had already been eliminated—Chuck Filmore, the very popular senator from New York, had gone missing in some sort of botched magic stunt orchestrated by that pompous illusionist, Michael Byrne—but several other politicians were already making campaign noises, showing up on the Sunday morning talk shows, deriding Drummond and his “do-nothing agenda”.

Drummond’s chief of staff, Linus Fallon, had just hung up his call to the kitchen when there was a sharp rap at the conference room’s double doors. To everyone’s surprise, it was the president’s secretary, an older woman named Greta with tiny spectacles and very short grey hair.

“You should turn on the television, sir,” she said breathlessly, her eyes wide behind her glasses. “Right now, sir.”

Drummond merely blinked at her, but Fallon arose briskly from his seat. “What network?” he demanded.

Greta shook her head slowly. “It doesn’t matter.”

A wall of televisions blipped to life, each showing essentially the same scene, but from many different angles. In one shot, the camera was being buffeted by a running crowd. Over their heads, streams of flying objects streaked, some as small as individual people, others the size of buses. Another screen showed the Statue of Liberty, but not as Drummond had ever seen it before. It no longer stood, but hunkered down next to its base, its right hand lowered, its torch plunged into the black water that surrounded Ellis Island. Yet another screen panned wildly across what were unmistakably the skyscrapers of New York City. Clustered around and atop the familiar buildings, however, were odd, colorful structures. Brightly lit bridges connected them at dizzying heights. Strangely quaint storefronts and marquees blinked against the night sky. More of the flying objects zoomed through the scene, mingling like insects, avoiding crashes by the narrowest of margins.

“What...” Drummond began, but his voice trailed off. He had read the running news ticker at the bottom of CNNs screen: NY SENATOR CHARLES FILMORE FOUND DEAD/UNEXPLAINED MASS PHENOMENA OVERWHELMS NYC.

From that point on, things had happened very quickly, and very haphazardly.

Drummond had known about the magical world, if only barely. On his second day of office, he had received a visit from the very shocking figure of Benjamin Franklyn, the supposedly long dead icon of America’s

founding. Franklyn had explained that he was a wizard (thus his magically augmented age), and that an entire magical community existed not only in the United States, but indeed the entire world. They were hidden, Franklyn explained, but quite real and very active, with their own cultures, economies, and governments. Fortunately, it seemed, an alliance had been reached some centuries ago that conjoined the governments of magical and “Muggle” America. This alliance was best represented by a tiny branch of the Secret Service known as the Magical Integration Bureau. Franklyn had introduced the new president to the head of this agency, a rather severe fireplug of a man named Lynch, who had assured Drummond that he need never think of the magical world again.

“My agents and I are fully capable of handling all the necessary interactions with the magical community,” Lynch informed him in a low, gravelly voice. “We’re well trained, fully equipped, and legally invisible. You will likely never hear from us again.”

Drummond was secretly glad of that, although he had harbored a degree of curiosity. In the days that followed, he had come up with several questions for Lynch—did the magical folk have cures for cancer or other diseases? Could their magic be harnessed for military use? What other historical figures might still be hidden away, alive and well in the wizarding community?—but he quickly discovered that there was simply no way to contact Mr. Lynch and his agency. No one else in Drummond’s cabinet knew anything about the Magical Integration Bureau, much less the wizarding world it represented. He’d be seen as insane even to ask about it.

Thus, pragmatist that he was, Drummond had simply forgotten about it.

When the Event occurred, however, he instantly remembered. By the time he got back to his office, Lynch was already there, waiting for him. He hadn’t had an appointment, of course, and no one else, not even Greta, knew that the man was there. Drummond dismissed everyone else, closed the door of the oval office with a slam, and demanded to know what was going on.

It was far worse than he imagined.

Apparently, some rogue witch with heretofore unimaginable powers had gone crazy at the Memorial Day parade in New York City. Lynch explained that the Statue of Liberty had been far more than a symbol, but a powerful magical object, responsible for the massive spell

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that hid the wizarding city of New Amsterdam from the Muggle city of New York that lay below it. This spell was supposedly impregnable, and yet somehow this rogue witch had been able to call out to the Statue, to give it a new order. Amazingly, the Statue had obeyed, lowering its torch into the ocean and thereby snuffing its spell. This act had revealed all of New Amsterdam to the Muggle New Yorkers below. Worst of all, it had occurred on live television, which had subsequently been broadcast to the entire country and much of the world.

It was time, Lynch announced gravely, for decisive action.

Fortunately, the Magical Integration Bureau had long since developed contingency plans for just such an event. Drummond had greatly disliked taking orders from Lynch, but he could think of no other alternatives.

“First, we must shut down all broadcasts of the Event,” Lynch announced firmly. “We can do this via the Unnecessary Instigation Act of nineteen seventy-two. Send military units to every television station in the country to confiscate any and all hard copies of the Event, as well as to deliver the edict that any broadcast of said footage would constitute a willful dissemination of propaganda meant to incite panic, punishable as an act of treason. Send the same announcement to all online communication services, instructing them to electronically ban the signature of any footage from the Event. This can be done easily enough with pattern recognition technology.”

Drummond shook his head in wonder. “You’re talking about a complete media blackout in a time when every cell phone is a camera and every American is a reporter! You might have been able to do it a hundred years ago, Lynch, but you can’t wipe out the memory of such a thing now. It’ll be everywhere!”

Lynch smiled grimly. “It’s easier today than it’s ever been before, Mr. President, precisely *because* of the use of technology. There are no hard copies of anything anymore. No physical photographs, no tapes, no films. *Everything* is digital, sir, and that which is digital is eminently trackable, ultimately temporary, and easily deletable. There is technology that can worm through the entire world computer system in search of the exact patterns represented by recordings of tonight’s Event. The program is already in place and doing its work. It will search out every cell phone, every home computer, every Internet-connected device on earth. When it finds what it is looking for, it will delete it. Once the footage of tonight’s

unfortunate revelation is deleted, no one will ever be able to prove it happened.”

“But—but people will remember it!” Drummond spluttered.

Lynch merely rolled his eyes. “You need to read more George Orwell, Mr. President. Memory is the most easily manipulated thing on earth. Trust us. We know what we are doing.”

And apparently they had.

By the next morning, footage of the Event had almost entirely ceased to be broadcast. Still, the news networks talked endlessly about what had happened, offering all sorts of speculation and conspiracy. Fortunately (amazingly) very few commentators seemed to be considering the most obvious explanation of all—that a secretly magical city had been revealed to the world at large. Instead, there was talk of government mind control experiments, or mass hypnosis, or even alien involvement. After all, it had only been a year since the mysterious “magic trick” that had resulted in the Chrysler Building’s relocation to the jungles of Venezuela. That had been blamed on alien technology, and perhaps outright extra-terrestrial involvement. It only made sense that those same mysterious aliens might be responsible for the phenomena that had seemed to happen in New York City.

“It might not have even happened at all,” said one commentator, a NASA astrophysicist with heavy glasses and almost no hair. “The images that we all saw that night might have been a complete fiction, created by outside forces and fed directly into the cameras by some sort of broadcasting beam. It might be that the Statue of Liberty still stands just as always, and that what we all witnessed was, essentially, alien special effects.”

It all seemed so plausible that even President Drummond wanted to believe it.

In the days that followed the Event, he signed orders that evacuated the entire population of Manhattan Island and erected a quarantine zone all around it. A no-fly zone was established over much of the eastern seaboard and coast guard cutters patrolled the waters for a ten mile perimeter around New York City. At Lynch’s recommendation, Drummond had offered almost no official explanation for these maneuvers.

“Let the press make up their own story,” he had said wryly. “They’re better at it than we are.”

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And, of course, he had been right. The news networks speculated that the military perimeter was a safety measure, established in the event that alien radiation might have affected the site of the Event.

And slowly, incredibly, life had seemed to go on.

The New York Stock Exchange had been relocated to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where a massive team of computer technicians had established a surprisingly functional international network in a matter of days. Most of the million and a half residents of Manhattan had gone through a short but intensive debriefing session, run by Mr. Lynch himself, and had emerged strangely baffled about the night of the Memorial Day parade. Most seemed to remember very little of the Event, or remembered it rather differently than it seemed to have happened. This, Drummond knew, was because of the influence of a team of wizard memory specialists in the employ of the Magical Integration Bureau. They were performing something called “Obliviations” on the witnesses, removing and altering their memories of that night. It was a painstaking process, but it was apparently necessary.

Drummond did not like any of it, but felt he had no other options.

Eventually, he held his first press conference about the Event. It was an unmitigated disaster. He could neither deny nor confirm the possibility of supposed alien involvement. He could not provide an exact date for when the island of Manhattan would be opened again to the public. And worst of all, he could not tell the truth. The press sensed this, and put it into their headlines:

DRUMMOND DENIES DENYING, CONFIRMS CONFIRMING—

New York Times

PRESIDENT PRESENTS PAINFULLY PURPOSELESS PRESSER—

Cleveland Plain Dealer

WHITE HOUSE MAINTAINS AWKWARD SILENCE ABOUT
EVENT—*Washington Post*

PREZ MEETS WITH ALIENS, SIGNS DEAL TO STAR IN NEXT
BROADCAST—*Inside View*

As if to add insult to injury, political pundits had begun to loudly lament the loss of Senator Charles Filmore, whose death was one of the few concrete realities of the Event. His funeral had become a national affair, broadcast on all the major networks. The New York Post ran a eulogy of the Senator with the title “The Best President We Never Had”.

Bumper stickers appeared across the country bearing the slogan: Don't Blame Me, I Would've Voted For Filmore.

Political opportunists took up the mantra, using it to portray Drummond as equivocating, weak-willed, and incapable of handling the unique challenges of the time. It seemed that the next year's election was lost even before it was begun. One politician in particular arose to the head of the fray, a woman senator named Carla Murphy, from Ohio. An attractive woman in her sixties with a long Washington pedigree, her ideas had become increasingly popular. Her presentation was firmly accomplished, her background seemingly unassailable, and her career path set. She wanted Drummond's job, and it looked like she had a very good chance of winning it.

Drummond sat in the White House dining room on a Sunday morning three months after the Event, watching the morning talk programs with a dour frown on his face and a cup of coffee growing cold in his hand.

"Make no mistake," Carla Murphy said on the television, looking pert and knowledgeable. "The President knows exactly what happened in New York City on the night of the Event. He is silent not because the American people, and the world in general, cannot handle the truth, but because there are forces at work that make it unwise to let the truth be fully known."

"Do you know what those forces are, Senator Murphy?" the television host asked, raising one eyebrow.

"Of course I don't, Charlie," she answered. "And even if I did, I might not tell either. The fact is, there may be very good reasons for keeping these things a secret. But I will promise you this. Even in secrecy there is a right way and a wrong way to respond to the public. It's one thing to have a national emergency and not be able to discuss it with the American people for reasons of security. It's another thing to simply pretend that there is no such national emergency. We're all smarter than that, no matter what the President thinks."

"I do so hate that woman," Drummond muttered to himself, clacking his coffee cup onto the table.

"I share your passion," the man next to him agreed smoothly.

Drummond jumped, knocking his coffee cup to the tile floor, where it shattered. He boggled at what had been an empty chair mere seconds before. A figure sat there now, wearing a long burgundy robe

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with a heavy hood. Drummond could see nothing of the man's face except for his sharp chin and a small smile. Drummond glanced quickly from the figure to the door of the dining room.

"Your men are perfectly all right, Mr. President," the robed figure said. "They still stand outside that very door, although they have no idea that I am here. There is no reason to alert them. I mean you no harm. I am, in fact, here to help you."

"H-how did you get in?" Drummond demanded, staring wide eyed at the strange figure.

"For people such as myself, it is surprisingly easy," the robed man said with a sigh. "You really should be more aware of just how vulnerable you are in this New World, Mr. President. The law of secrecy between the magical and Muggle worlds has been breached. Why, I might have been anyone at all. I might have been an enemy, come to murder you right here at your breakfast. Then what would we all do?"

Drummond shuddered. He stared speechlessly at the man. Had he literally just appeared there? Was it even possible? Yes, of course it was. The man was quite right. Since the Event, this truly was a New World.

"Let me help you with that," the robed man said, gesturing vaguely toward the broken coffee cup. Drummond saw a black stick in the man's pale fingers. There was a faint spark of light, and the shattered cup snapped back into one piece. It lofted gently into the air and settled silently onto the table at Drummond's right hand.

"There," the robed figure sighed, pocketing his wand. "No harm, no foul."

"Who are you?" Drummond said weakly, his heart pounding. "What do you want?"

"For now, you may call me the Collector, Mr. President," the man smiled. "And like I said, I want to help you. You and I have a mutual problem. Fortunately, we also have a mutual solution.

Drummond forced himself to calm down. He sat up straight and tried to regain some sense of composure. "And what exactly is this mutual problem?"

The robed man nodded toward the television. "A certain popular Senator with designs to occupy your office."

Drummond glanced toward the television, saw the impeccable grey hair and handsome features of Carla Murphy still talking easily with her interviewer.

“She will succeed, you know,” the Collector said with a light sigh. “She is already far more popular than you. Frankly, she will make a much more effective leader than you. I would vote for her myself if I had the chance.”

Drummond frowned, his cheeks reddening. “Then why help me?”

“Because Senator Murphy has, shall we say, views that are counterproductive to our aims.”

“When you say ‘we,’” Drummond said, peering closely at his visitor, “do you mean you and me... or you and others?”

The Collector shrugged vaguely. “Yes.”

Drummond considered this. “What do you propose? You should know that I won’t do anything unworthy of my office. I may not be the best statesman in the world, but I’m not above the law.”

The Collector was already laughing, even as Drummond finished speaking. “How delightfully self-deceptive you people are,” he said with a shake of his head. “Already you have cheated, lied, and slandered, and yet you convince yourself that you are no worse than anyone else, that you have done only that which is required. How wonderfully resilient your consciences must be.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Drummond replied sternly, throwing his napkin onto the table. “And I don’t care how you came to be here. If you’re just going to make baseless allegations, you can vanish right back out of here.”

“Calm yourself, Mr. President,” the robed figure soothed. “I do not judge you in the least for your actions. I respect what you have done to achieve your office. This is why I am confident that you will, indeed, allow me to help you.”

Drummond bristled but leaned back in his chair. “All right, then, Mr. *Collector*. Assuming your assistance is something I could benefit from, what’s it going to cost me? Nobody gives free help in this town. What’s in it for you?”

“It’s very simple, Mr. President,” the visitor answered. “You will make me your vice president.”

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Drummond startled. “*Vice president?* Are you crazy? I already *have* a vice president, if you haven’t noticed. Joe Mattigan is a good man, even if he is a bit of a media dullard. What am I supposed to do with him?”

“That is not your problem, Mr. President,” the Collector announced breezily. “I simply require your promise, unbreakable and sealed, that if the post becomes available, you will name me to the position. I will make it very easy for you. My credentials will be unassailable. No one will doubt your judgment. If you do this, and if you follow my very simple instructions, your problem with Senator Murphy will conveniently go away. You will be whisked easily into your next term as president, with me by your side, your loyal and constant advisor.”

Drummond considered this. He was distinctly uncomfortable with it, and yet he could not immediately turn down his visitor’s assistance. Perhaps he could get rid of the strange man later, once Murphy was happily disposed of as a political threat. Perhaps all he, Drummond, had to do was to appease his unusual benefactor until then. He studied the Collector for a long moment. Finally, he nodded.

“I will consider it,” he said, knowing in his heart that he had already decided. “But if I choose to accept your assistance, you must promise to keep your methods entirely above board. Nothing illegal.”

The Collector smiled warmly. “You can trust us, Mr. President.”

Drummond considered this, realized that it was not particularly reassuring, but decided not to pursue it. “Assuming you do become my vice president, sir, I expect you have some ideas for how to handle this whole Event business? You are, after all, obviously a magical person yourself. What will you propose? Full disclosure of the wizard community? Equality between our worlds? Peaceful integration of our different cultures?”

The Collector’s smile widened slowly, becoming disconcertingly predatory. “Not,” he said quietly, conspiratorially, “*exactly...*”



Marshall Parris stepped out onto the sidewalk, squinted up at the stunningly bright California sun, and shrugged dejectedly out of his trench coat.

For someone who had spent most of his adult life as a private detective in New York City, the sunny streets of Los Angeles took a lot of getting used to. For one thing, it always seemed to be summer. To a guy like Parris, who was culturally inclined to wear a fedora and a trench coat nine months out of the year, there was something fundamentally wrong with the math of so much sunlight. There was very little fog (even the legendary L.A. smog was barely a wisp of its former self), and the wind, when it blew, was light and gentle, unlike the gritty blasts that had scoured the streets of Parris' beloved Big Apple.

He hooked his trench coat over his shoulder, sighed, and began to walk. Whispering palm trees lined the boulevard that led toward his temporary office, a second floor walk-up situated over a coffee shop. The shop was called Jack's Magic Bean and was run by an extraordinarily fit seventy year old man named, unsurprisingly, Jack. Jack had rented the upstairs office to Parris for a rather high sum, but had been remarkably laid back about when—or indeed if—Parris ever chose to pay it.

"No rush, man, no rush," Jack had said, as he'd handed Parris the keys. "You just get me a check whenever you can. It's all crazy these days, you dudes from New York getting moved all over the place, government cover-ups, and Martians showing up and hypnotizing everybody."

Parris accepted this with wary suspicion. After all, if his New York landlord had shown such magnanimity, Parris would have likely discovered that his rental was missing a few minor details, like glassed windows, or perhaps a floor. Here in California, though, things were different. The office above Jack's Magic Bean was tiny but comfortable, with a huge bay window and a working bathroom. Unfortunately, every

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wall was painted a bright coral pink and decorated with bits of driftwood. For a fleeting moment, Parris felt he would have preferred a missing floor.

It had been nearly three months since Parris had left New York City, nearly three months since the Event that had changed everything and sent the entire city packing for the foreseeable future.

Parris knew that the Event had not, in fact, been caused by Martians. He'd known about the wizarding city of New Amsterdam for years, although he had never, until that night, seen it with his own eyes. A guy in his line of work tended to learn a lot of stuff that was supposed to be secret. After all, a lot of Parris' clients were witches and wizards themselves. They pretended they weren't—it was just force of habit—but they knew *he* knew, and that made it all right. Their vow of secrecy didn't count in situations like that. The fact of the matter is, sometimes even witches and wizards need a competent private eye, and sometimes the best private eye is a guy like Parris, a guy with no magic in him at all. Sometimes the best private eye is a Muggle.

Parris knew that that was what the wizarding folk called people like him. People who didn't have any magic in their blood were called Muggles, at least by polite magical society. Some of the witches and wizards he tracked down had called him much less flattering names. It didn't bother him. Every society had its bigotries, and the society of witches and wizards was no exception. Besides, the names were technically right. He *was* totally human, without a lick of magic in him at all.

Technically.

Parris approached the stairway next to Jack's Magic Bean, turned into the shadow of the awning, and clumped noisily up to his office door.

The coral walls met him cheerily. Parris tried to ignore them as he checked his telephone messages. There were none. He crossed disconsolately to the little kitchenette and started a pot of coffee.

It had also been nearly three months since he'd had a client. That was the worst part of it all. The career of a private detective (especially one who specialized in what Parris liked to refer to as "the trans-mundane") depended almost entirely on word of mouth referrals. Unfortunately, his reputation had not exactly followed him to his temporary home in California. Without clients, he could not pay his rent, and surely even Jack's magnanimity would eventually run out. Worse, he couldn't hire a secretary, which was, of course, essential to the appearance

of a thriving detective agency. When clients called, they expected a perky, business-like female voice. They wanted to hear the reassuring clack of a typewriter and the ruffle of pages in a scheduling book. What they most certainly didn't want to hear was the recorded message of the detective himself, especially when he didn't know how to operate the answering machine, and had cut himself off in the middle of his own greeting.

As if to remind him of this, the phone on Parris' desk began to ring.

It surprised him so much that he dropped the coffee pot. It fell onto the tiny counter, miraculously managed not to shatter, and threw up cold water all over his pants. He leapt backwards, brushing himself off furiously.

On the desk, the telephone stopped ringing and the answering machine clicked on.

"You've reached the temporary office of detective Marshall Parris, private eye, specializing in the trans-mundane. I'm currently on the case, but feel free to call my cell phone at 555-21—*BEEP!*"

Parris stumbled toward the desk, still brushing at his pants and reaching for the phone, but the caller had already hung up. The annoying buzz of the dial tone sounded for a few seconds, followed by a click as the machine hung up.

It was probably for the best, anyway. The only other time his office phone had rung it had been an old Venice Beach woman seeking help in finding her missing youthful idealism. Parris had almost yelled at her, assuming that she'd been mocking him. She hadn't, and it was then that Parris had realized just how different life in California was going to be.

He considered trying to re-record his answering machine message, if only to get the rest of his cell phone number into it. There was no point, really. His cell phone had been disconnected for lack of payment. He sighed, flopped into his desk chair, and stared out the window at the impossibly blue California sky.

There was a knock at his office door.

Parris' eyes snapped toward the closed door. The odd thing was not so much that he had a visitor, but that he hadn't heard footsteps on the stairway outside, which was notoriously loud. He considered this for a brief moment, decided it was rather a good sign, and called out, "It's not locked."

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The door opened silently and a young woman stepped inside. She closed the door carefully behind her and studied the man behind the desk.

“Marshall Parris, I assume?” she asked in a clipped, unmistakably British accent.

He considered giving her a cagy response, but decided to play it straight. “That’s what the sign out front says. Marshall Parris, private eye.”

“Specializing in the trans-mundane,” the young woman said, nodding once. She moved toward his desk but made no effort to sit down. She was attractive enough, with long dark hair, and she was dressed in a distinctly un-California manner. Her skirt was floral patterned and prim, swishing over chunky black boots. She wore a pale blue sweater, despite the constant Los Angeles summer. Parris decided he liked her, even if she didn’t exactly seem like client material.

“What can I do for you, miss...?” he said, rising to his feet. He remembered that his pants were still damp. “Er... coffee mishap,” he explained a bit lamely. “Never once happened to me in New York.”

The young woman nodded again, still unsmiling.

“I’ve come to hire your services, Mr. Parris,” she said, meeting his eyes. “Your... *trans-mundane* services.”

“I see,” Parris replied. “Do sit down, Miss...?”

“You can call me Petra,” the young woman answered, settling herself reluctantly into one of the client chairs. “Although I go by other names.”

Parris nodded and drew a yellow notebook out of his desk drawer. He scribbled the woman’s name on the top. “Petra. Means rock. Are you in a band, perhaps?”

“We’ll get along much better if you stop trying to guess what I am here for, Mr. Parris,” the young woman answered with cool courtesy. “You’ve had enough magical clients to know that each case is very unique.”

Parris leaned back in his chair, which creaked tiredly. “Maybe I have,” he agreed. “But I’ve also had enough *young* clients to know that they can’t always afford my services, magical or not.”

Petra nodded and adjusted herself on the chair so that she could reach slightly forward. Something glittered in her outstretched hand. Ten heavy coins spilled from her fingers onto the wood of Parris’ desk.

“Will gold do?” she asked, raising her eyebrows slightly.

Parris tried to look nonchalant. His chair creaked again as he leaned forward, examining the thick golden coins. “These aren’t leprechaun money, are they?” he asked sharply, glancing up at the woman. “I wasn’t born yesterday, you know.”

“Those are galleons,” Petra answered patiently. “Legal tender in the wizarding world, but valuable for their weight even in the Muggle world. I will pay you ten of those a day.”

“Plus traveling expenses,” Parris added automatically, a bit breathlessly.

“There won’t be any such expenses,” Petra replied grimly. “I will travel with you, by my own means.”

Parris nodded again. He picked up one of the gold coins, felt its heaviness in the palm of his hand. The metal was cold to the touch. “Well then,” he said lamely. “I hope my services will be up to your lofty standards, lady, ‘cause I’ll be honest with you: this is some serious cashola.”

Petra merely eyed his office for a long moment, letting her gaze travel around the brightly painted walls. “Where do you keep it, Mr. Parris?”

Parris closed his hand over the cold coin. “What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean,” Petra said coolly. “After all, how else does a Muggle come to be known as the best detective in the wizarding world? How does a Muggle confront some of the darkest witches and wizards in existence and live to tell of it? You may be lucky, Mr. Parris, but no one is *that* lucky. You are protected, somehow. You have a talisman. I’m just curious, sir. Where do you keep it?”

Parris narrowed his eyes at his new client. “Even if you were right, lady, you’d need to pay me a lot more to answer that question.”

Petra accepted this with a shrug. “I’m just being cautious, Mr. Parris. My case, I think, will be the most difficult and dangerous of your career. I only ask about your talisman because I wish to be sure that it will, indeed, protect you under the most extraordinary of circumstances. Furthermore, I wish to know that it may indeed assist you in finding what I seek.”

Parris began to wonder if this young woman might be more trouble than she was worth, gold coins or not.

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“I keep *it* on me at all times,” he said quietly. “Although no one would be able to get it from me. It’s not particularly powerful, and it wouldn’t do anyone else any good, anyway. But for me, yeah, it’ll do the trick. You’ll just have to trust me on that.” He leaned forward again, resting his elbows on the desk. “And just let me get one more thing straight, lady: my ‘talisman’, as you call it, may keep me safe from the worst of your people—it may help me stay out of sight and get into places that nobody else ever could—but it’s me that does all the hard work. *This* is where the detecting happens,” he tapped his forehead meaningfully. “Capiche?”

Petra smiled slightly. “I never doubted otherwise, Mr. Parris.”

“Good,” Parris said, relaxing. “So. What’s the job and when do we start?”

“We start right now, Mr. Parris,” the young woman answered. “And the job is very simple. I need you to help me find someone.”

“A magical someone?” Parris hazarded, picking up his pencil again and pulling his notepad toward him.

“The most magical someone of them all,” Petra sighed. “She has hidden herself away from me, and her hiding is especially good. She isn’t bound by time or space or even reality. She can take the form of water and travel through the deepest oceans, even through pipes and faucets.”

Parris blew out a deep breath. “I never met any witch who could do any of that,” he said with a shake of his head.

“That is because the woman we seek is no witch,” Petra answered. “She is a Fate, one of three currently loose in the world. My sister and I must find her at all costs.”

Parris cocked his head at her. “Why? If, er, you don’t mind my asking.”

The young woman’s smile turned icy. “Because,” she said, as if the answer was obvious, “*we* are her *sister* fates.”

Parris drew a deep sigh and scribbled a few notes. On the bottom of his yellow notepad, he wrote one word: CRAZY. He nodded at it in a businesslike fashion. “All right. So we’re looking for some mythical water demon who might be anywhere, anytime, and who has... let me guess... cosmically monstrous powers. Yes?”

Petra nodded and shrugged. “No more so than me.”

“But *you* can’t find her,” Parris added, as if just to be sure.

“She hides from us because she fears us.”

Parris nodded slowly. "Of course," he said carefully, "this doesn't mean that I need to fear you, too, right?"

Petra's face darkened. She looked more annoyed than threatening. "Do you want the job or not, Mr. Parris?"

In answer, he put down his pencil and scooped the pile of gold coins toward him. "What's this demon Fate woman's name, then?" he asked loudly as the coins clattered into his desk drawer.

"Judith," the young woman answered firmly, her face still dark. "The Lady of the Lake."

Parris sighed. He closed his top desk drawer then slid open a smaller drawer below it. Inside was a bottle of cheap whiskey and a small revolver. He took the revolver out, checked the chambers, saw that they were all loaded, and then seated it in a holster in his jacket. It was a generally pointless weapon against magical people, but it was better than nothing. Besides, some habits were very hard to break.

"One last thing," he said, standing up behind his desk. "Just out of curiosity. Assuming we find this sister Fate of yours. What will you do with her?"

Petra's face remained dark, but she lifted her eyes to Parris, studying him for a moment. She looked almost as if she hadn't even considered the question until that very moment.

"Why," she answered faintly, wonderingly. "I guess... I shall kill her."



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1. THE FOUR CABINETS

James had expected his return to Hogwarts to be a happy occasion. Indeed, the sight of the enormous crimson engine of the Hogwarts Express, shrouded with steam, hissing and clanging with prosaic urgency, was a very welcome sight after the events of the previous months. Even Albus, who had spent the holiday in a sort of angry fugue, had displayed an almost annoyingly chipper mood all morning, eager to board the train and rejoin his Slytherin mates. At the station, he spied their cousin Rose with her parents, Ron and Hermione, and ran to join them. Lily, the youngest Potter, hung back, huddling nervously next to her mother.

“It’s all right, love,” Ginny soothed. “I thought you were excited about your first year? You’ve been begging to go with your brothers ever since James’ first year. Go on now. No long goodbyes.”

Ted Lupin appeared from the crowd looking roguish and bedraggled, accompanied by his fiancée, the contrastingly immaculate Victoire Weasley. James knew that Ted would be taking the train as well, on his way back to Hogsmeade after a short visit to London. The trip had ostensibly been for the benefit of seeing Victoire and his grandmother, but

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Albus had suspected otherwise. For the past week, he had insisted that Ted's visit had been no holiday at all, but rather part of a reconvening of the old Order of the Phoenix at Grimmauld Place. Ted alternately scoffed at the idea (in front of Ginny) and played along (in private), egging Albus into a frenzy of jealousy that he himself had not been invited to any alleged secret meetings.

At the sight of Lily in her school things, Ted disengaged from Victoire's arm and bowed low, extending a hand toward the younger girl. "I am smitten!" he declared. "My darling Lily, will you accompany me for the journey? My reputation can only benefit from being seen in the company of such beauty."

Ginny rolled her eyes but Lily grinned. Sheepishly she took Ted's hand and hoisted her bag. She glanced back at her mother once, her eyes bright, as Ted led her happily toward the train.

"He is incorrigible." Victoire stated flatly, crossing her arms. Next to her, Ginny nodded, still smiling rather mistily.

It had been a year since any of them had set foot in the halls of Hogwarts-- a year spent across the ocean, at the American magical school of Alma Aleron. It hadn't been a bad year, exactly, although it had ended very badly indeed. For a moment, as James accepted a goodbye kiss from his mother and gathered his bags and Nobby's cage, it was easy to pretend that the last year had not happened at all. It was a very serene thought, broken only by the fact that his cousin Lucy, who should have been accompanying him to Hogwarts with great anticipation (it would have been her first full school year there, after all) was not with him.

James tried not to think about that. It was difficult.

"Goodbye, James," his father said somewhat somberly, as if sensing his son's thoughts. "Have a good term. And here. I... have something for you." He paused in the shadow of the train and produced a small package. He stared at it for a moment, and then, almost reluctantly, handed it to James, hunkering down next to him. In a lower voice, he said, "Don't open it until you're settled in. Be alone when you do it. All right?"

James glanced at his father's face and saw that he was quite serious. He cocked his head suspiciously. "Does Mum know about this?"

His father's lips twitched into a small, grave smile. "No. Nor does Albus, although you can tell him about it later. It may involve him

at some point. But I'm leaving that up to you for now. Lily should stay out of it, though. I need you to promise me that, James."

"How can I promise if I don't even know what it is?" James prodded hopefully.

His father held out his hand. "Give it back, then."

"All right, already. I promise." James hugged the package to himself, frowning.

His father nodded seriously. "I expect you to keep your word then. It's Lily's first year, James. I want her to enjoy it. I want her most difficult challenges to be Arithmancy-related. She's already gotten her fill of dangerous adventures at Hogwarts, if you recall."

James nodded, remembering the night of the Triumvirate, when Lily had disappeared from the audience, spirited away to the Chamber of Secrets where she was very nearly lost forever. "I'll keep a watch on her, dad. Don't worry."

"I'll hold you to that, son," his father said, and James heard a hint of regret in his father's voice. *He'd rather be watching over her himself*, he thought; *he's worried about her. About all of us.* It was a disconcerting realization.

Harry Potter stood and clapped his son affectionately on the shoulder. "Happy travels, son. Just keep that package tucked away until tonight."

James nodded, feeling a small surge of pride. He didn't know what it was, but the look on his father's face was familiar-- it was the face James and Albus had come to call 'Auror mode'. James unzipped his bag and carefully stuffed the package into it, burying it among his things. "I don't even know what package you're talking about," he said, straight-faced.

Harry nodded at his son but did not smile. "Off with you, then. I'll... be in touch."

Behind James, the great engine produced a deafening hiss, sending up a cloud of dense steam. James shouldered his bag, turned, and climbed into the wood-smelling warmth of the train. He found an empty compartment, stowed his bag and Nobby's cage, and knelt on the bench near the window, peering out. The train shuddered into motion and King's Cross Station began to recede smoothly backwards, as if the entire world was on rollers outside the train. James felt inexplicably cheerful, despite everything that had happened.

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What, he wondered, was in the package from his father? He glanced at his bag, imagining the parcel buried inside. It was smallish, about as long as a wand but much thicker, wrapped in plain brown paper and tied with twine. Could it be...?

No, he told himself. Of course not.

After a few minutes, there grew a commotion in the corridor outside his empty compartment door. It was his cousins Rose and Louis, along with Ralph Deedle, one of his best friends, and somewhat surprisingly, Scorpius Malfoy, whose smarmy, drawling voice still sometimes made James want to reach for his wand, despite the fact that Scorpius had proven his merit as a Gryffindor and a friend on several occasions. Their faces crowded suddenly against the glass of the door, peering in. Rose grinned and James happily waved them all inside. The next moment, the compartment was filled with a cacophony of excited voices, clamoring bags, and the annoyed hooting of Scorpius' new great horned owl, which waved its wings indignantly in its golden cage as it was stowed in the overhead.

Shortly, wands were produced and new spells, learned over the summer from various dodgy sources, were tested and compared. Scorpius succeeded in temporarily turning Ralph's toad into a tiny statue, while Rose's Invisium charm-- a notoriously difficult spell meant to render a person invisible-- was just effective enough to subject them all to the sight of a reluctantly half-vanished Louis, seemingly reduced to various bones and muscles. Once this was (very thankfully) rectified, Rose and Ralph fell into a heated Wizard Chess match. James and Scorpius enjoyed a game of Winkles and Augers, managing to upset the chess match only twice (the second time inspiring the chess pieces to temporarily put aside their differences and launch an all-out attack on the broken Remembrall that Scorpius had produced for use as the Winkle, finally destroying it with their tiny swords and battle-axes).

None of them spoke of the Night of the Unveiling, or of the unfortunate Lucy, or of the mysteriously vanished Petra and Izzy, whose actions had simultaneously saved James' dad, Harry Potter, and his partner, Titus Hardcastle, while laying bare the entirety of the magical world to Muggle eyes. No one even mentioned the fact that their headmaster, Merlinus Ambrosius, was no more and that his replacement had, as yet, not been announced. Everyone knew that the entire fabric of their world had changed dramatically in a very short time, and that the

future was an eerily uncertain place. But for now there seemed to be an unspoken agreement that it was best just to ride the train, return to their schooling, and hope for the best.

It was dark and raining upon their arrival at Hogsmeade station. Hagrid paced along the platform, summoning the first years in his booming voice, oblivious of the silvery downpour that beaded in his beard and matted his thick hair to his forehead. James waved at him as he ran toward the carriages with their ghastly thestrals. Hagrid waved back, smiling gamely and surrounded by a crowd of hunkering first years, cloaks pulled over their heads against the rain.

James shared a noisy carriage ride with Rose, Ralph, Scorpius, and two Ravenclaws who he barely knew. They asked him about Zane, whom they remembered from their first year, but fell silent as the carriage left the lights of the station and began the jouncing, splashy trek toward the castle.

Fifteen minutes later, it was a tired and damp crew that clamoured into the Great Hall, blinking in the light of the thousands of floating candles and the brilliance of the white-clothed house tables. Beneath the Slytherin banner, Trenton Bloch spied Ralph and waved vigorously, beckoning him over. Ralph grinned back as Albus threw an arm over the bigger boy's shoulder.

"Home sweet home, eh, Ralph? Come on!"

Together, the two threaded between the tables and fell into their seats at the Slytherin table, where they were greeted raucously. James noticed that some of the older Slytherins, former cronies of his nemesis, Tabitha Corsica, did not join in the welcoming committee. The group sat near the front of the hall and looked away, as if bored or vaguely disgusted by their mates' enthusiasm. Without the presence of Tabitha's icy charm, however, the gathering appeared merely petulant rather than coolly detached.

James settled into a seat at the Gryffindor table with a sigh of relief. There was Graham Warton and Deidre Finnegan, both fellow fourth years, and Joseph Torrance, and Devindar Das, seventh year and Quidditch captain. Further down the table, waving wildly, was Cameron Creevey, seated next to several other third years. Distinctly missing, however, were Sabrina Hildegard, Noah Metzker and Damien Damascus, three of James' good friends and fellow members of the club of mischief-makers known as the Gremlins. They had graduated the previous year,

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thus ending, for all intents and purposes, the reign of the Gremlins. It was sad to have missed his friends' last year and graduation, but it was also exciting to stand on the fringe of becoming part of the Hogwarts "old Guard" himself.

He would be going on Hogsmeade weekends this year. And learning more advanced defensive and duelling spells! And going to the now-traditional Yule Ball! And most importantly of all, after his success playing Clutchcudgel at Alma Aleron during the previous year, James was determined to finally-- *finally!*-- make the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He sighed deeply, in happy anticipation.

There had been times during the previous year when James had been quite sure he would never see Hogwarts again. He realized that some part of him had been secretly worried, even during the train ride, that something might still prevent his arrival. It had been a summer of upheaval and dark surprises, after all. Nothing felt particularly safe anymore. But here he was, seated back in his old place at Hogwarts as if nothing had happened at all. He felt pleasantly exhausted, as if he could climb onto the table and go to sleep right there, among the crystal goblets and gleaming silverware.

His reverie was broken, however, as a small cough announced someone standing behind him. James glanced back and was surprised to see tiny Professor Flitwick offering him a rather strange, strained smile.

"Welcome back, Mr. Potter," Flitwick said peremptorily. "I wonder if I could, er, borrow you for a moment?"

James frowned. "You mean... now?"

"If you would be so kind," Flitwick nodded, grimacing slightly. "It should only take a moment of your time. It's a trifle, really..." He trailed away, glancing around the hall as if avoiding James' eyes. On the dais, Professor McGonagall was positioning the stool and the Sorting Hat, preparing for the start of year tradition. Lily and the rest of the first years were lining up before the dais, dripping rainwater and excitedly nervous, led by Professor Longbottom. Lily stared up at the floating candles, smiling irrepressibly.

"Go on," Scorpius nudged him impatiently. "She'll be fine. All the surprises happened the year your brother and I got sorted."

James nodded, turning back to Flitwick. "All right. Sure, Professor. Whatever you need."

Flitwick nodded and smiled as James stood. Wordlessly, the tiny Professor led James through the rear doors, across the Entrance Hall, and down a corridor toward what James recognized as the faculty rooms. The Professor produced his wand and tapped the knob of a heavy door near the end. With a golden flash, the lock unlatched and the door creaked open slightly. Flitwick glanced back at James, as if to assure he was still there, gave another nervous smile, and pushed the door open.

“I am sorry to interrupt your arrival, Mr. Potter,” he said, leading James into a tiny, darkened room. It was obviously Flitwick’s office, for the desk and chair were almost comically small, albeit immaculately arranged and organized. A single tall, leaded window dominated the curved wall to the right of the desk. In front of this, silhouetted against the night-blue glass, was a square shape on an easel. “It’s a small duty of mine, you understand. It’s always been a pleasure, really-- a way of using my meager talents to connect with those who’ve passed on. Still, occasionally it proves... surprisingly difficult.”

James moved to the left, away from the silhouetted shape on the easel, allowing Flitwick to approach the desk. The professor pointed his wand at a large brass lantern on the corner of the desk, and then paused. He glanced up at James.

“You will have noticed, Mr. Potter, that we remember our headmasters in a rather unique manner at Hogwarts, yes?”

It took James a moment to understand what Flitwick was talking about. Finally, mystified, he answered. “You mean the portraits? Up in the headmaster’s office?”

“Precisely!” Flitwick exclaimed excitedly. “Precisely, Mr. Potter. Upon the passing of every headmaster, their living portrait is added to the gallery, granting the new headmaster the benefit of their combined wisdom and council. It is a unique arrangement, I might add. No other institution bears such a thorough and well preserved gallery of its leaders. Why, I am proud to say that it has even rated placement in the book of the Top Ninety-Nine Wonders Most Wizards Will Never See. I could show you, if you wish. I have a copy right here in my desk. Er...”

Without lighting the lantern, Flitwick moved fussily behind his desk and began sliding open drawers, shuffling noisily through them.

James was still frowning in confusion. “Professor,” he ventured, raising his voice over the sound of Flitwick’s ransacking of his own office. “Er... what does this have to do with me?”

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“Hm? Oh,” Flitwick glanced up at James and seemed to deflate a bit. “I apologize, Mr. Potter. This is all rather... mm-hmm. Quite.” He cast around the darkened room fitfully, and then sank into his doll-sized chair. Without looking, he waved his wand toward the chair behind James. “Please, do have a seat, young man. Perhaps some further explanation will suffice.”

James lowered himself into the normal-sized chair, which was ridiculously overstuffed and smelled strongly of mothballs. Flitwick sighed.

“Most people do not know this, Mr. Potter,” he said in a more subdued voice. “But I am not, strictly-speaking, one hundred percent human.” He paused, studying James’ face in the darkened room. “You are not surprised, I see.”

James’ cheeks reddened. “Well, er. Not as such, professor. No. Some of the students have... er... made guesses.”

Flitwick smiled at James-- a genuine smile this time, twinkling in his tiny eyes-- and then he laughed aloud. “Of course, of course,” he nodded. “Nor do I blame them. I will allow you the truth, Mr. Potter, as explanation of why I have called you here. I am part goblin, you see. One quarter, in fact. Tell me, were your classmates’ speculations correct?”

James shrugged uncomfortably. “Yeeess... A bit. Some had thought maybe you were part... er. I really shouldn’t say, Professor.”

“Oh do tell, James,” the Professor beamed, leaning eagerly forward. “In times like these, a good laugh is always welcome.”

James’ face was burning now. “Well, Professor. Everyone really likes you, see? It was never meant to be disrespectful at all. Mostly we all think it’s really cool. But--”

“Out with it, young man!” Flitwick interrupted, still grinning in anticipation.

“Hinkypunk, sir.”

Flitwick rocked back in his chair and let out a gust of jovial laughter.

“Oh, I daresay, that would make a better story,” he admitted, still laughing and wiping his eyes. “Much better, indeed.”

James smiled as well and shook his head. “I still don’t understand, Professor. What’s this have to do with...”

Flitwick composed himself, although a ghost of a smile still curled his lips. He nodded. “Forgive me, Mr. Potter. I am delaying the

inevitable. As I said, I am part goblin and goblins, as you may or may not know, are particularly good at the alchemical arts. A, er, relative of mine, in fact, is one of the best restoration artists in the world. His specialty is, unsurprisingly, magical portraiture. It's in my blood, you see. Not everyone can do it. I can take no credit for it, although I have worked long and hard to hone my skills, meager as they may be."

Realization began to dawn on James. He looked hard at the tiny Professor across from him. "You... paint the portraits? All those magical portraits of the former headmasters are yours?"

Flitwick raised his hands in a deprecating gesture. "By no means all of them, only the most recent. It is quite an honour, one that I inherited decades ago. I paint each portrait upon the death of the headmaster, using the skills handed down to me by my goblin forefathers. It is a rather secret art, combining both the artistic and the alchemical, although it can be taught even to non-goblins. You may recall Professor Jackson, of the American school, is rather an expert on the subject, even if he is a bit... well... *uninspired*."

James nodded emphatically. "Tell me about it." He paused and looked aside, at the silhouetted shape on the easel. Suddenly he felt very curious to see it in the light. "So that's... your most recent portrait? That's... Headmaster Merlin?"

Flitwick heaved a great, long sigh, turning to share James' gaze. "Headmaster Merlinus," he agreed. "In a manner of speaking."

"What do you mean?"

"This is why I have called you here, James," Flitwick answered quietly. "Sometimes, magical portraiture is a very ticklish task. Sometimes it requires... extra measures."

James glanced back at the professor, unsure what he meant.

Flitwick leaned slightly forward, producing his wand again and pointing it toward the lantern. "Mind your eyes," he instructed. With a small tap, the lantern flared alight, filling the cramped office with warmth and golden light.

James' eyes immediately flicked toward the portrait in front of the window.

It was indeed Merlinus. His face was painted with immaculate perfection, showing the square line of his jaw, the rather crooked nose, and the stern, eerily probing eyes. He was seated, just like all of the other headmaster portraits, but unlike most of them he was not leaning back in

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a pose of rest. He sat upright, his bearded chin raised almost challengingly, his right hand clutching the arm of his ornate wooden throne-- a throne James recognized very well from the adventures of his first year. Two black rings shone on the headmaster's large, meaty hand.

But something was wrong.

James stood slowly and approached the painting, peering at it intently.

"It's not..." he shook his head slowly. "Not..."

"It is not alive," Flitwick admitted, coming to join James in front of the canvas. "Not a breath, not a single spark of life, no matter what I do with it."

James stared hard at the portrait. It was perfect in every way, absolutely capturing the essence of the ancient sorcerer. And yet, it was just a picture, a mere image, somehow even less alive than a Muggle photograph.

He glanced down at Flitwick. "So... what's missing?"

"That is very much the question, young man," Flitwick answered. "I was rather hoping you could tell me."

James shook his head. "Me? But, I'm no painter. I can't even draw."

"Perhaps not. But you knew the headmaster, Mr. Potter, perhaps better than anyone in this age. And perhaps even more importantly, you were with him when he died. You witnessed the moment that he gave up the ghost. I am sorry to bring up such a difficult memory. I don't mean to seem heartless. You may refuse, of course, and I will bear you no disrespect. But it may be that you can give this portrait what I, with all my technical skill, cannot. If you are willing."

James looked back at the unmoving portrait again. He shrugged. "I don't mind, Professor. I was sort of hoping to see him one more time anyway. Even if it is just a reflection, and not really him. But I don't know how I can help. I don't--"

"Just touch the portrait, Mr. Potter," Flitwick said quietly, urging James forward. "It may be the final ingredient-- your memory of him, the imprint his death made on you. Perhaps, if we are fortunate, you may pass that spark on. It is the only thing left to try."

James approached the painting. Merlin's sharp eyes peered out of the painted face, seeming to look at James, to study him, but it was only an illusion. There was no life there. Just paint on canvas.

“Are you sure, Professor,” James asked, raising his right hand.

“Yes, yes,” Flitwick insisted, obviously anxious to see his work completed. “The paint is long set. One touch will do it. Go ahead, James. Fear not.”

James leaned toward the portrait. Merlin’s face was perfectly life sized, staring blindly out at him. The shadow of James’ hand crept up it, and then, with no fanfare, his fingertips touched their own shadow. The whorls of paint were hard to the touch, full of texture and purpose. This close to, however, it was hard to see the portrait as anything other than strokes of dried paint.

Flitwick watched, poised on the toes of his boots. Finally, after a long moment, he exhaled.

“Thank you Mr. Potter,” he said, taking a step back. “That will be all.”

James took his fingertips away from the portrait. He hadn’t felt anything magical at all. He frowned and backed away from the portrait.

“Did it work?”

Flitwick smiled disconsolately and shook his head. “I am afraid not. I apologize for wasting your time, Mr. Potter, and for dredging up unpleasant memories. Thank you for being brave enough to make the attempt.”

James glanced at the Professor, then back at the still canvas. “So... what’s next? What will it take to fix the portrait of the headmaster?”

Flitwick produced his wand once more and pointed it at the lantern on his desk. “As I said, Mr. Potter, you were the last hope for the portrait. I am afraid there is no fixing to be done. For the first time in nine centuries, there will be no living portrait of a departed headmaster.”

“But... why not?”

Flitwick smiled tiredly. “Perhaps the reason is as obvious as it is unsatisfying,” he replied. “Merlinus Ambrosius, as you know more than anyone, was no ordinary wizard.”

With a tap, Flitwick extinguished his lantern.



By the time James returned to the Great Hall, the Sorting Ceremony was complete. Lily was seated at the front of the Gryffindor table, pink-cheeked and already laughing with her new friends. Professor McGonagall had stowed the Sorting Hat for one more year while some small commotion occupied the head table. A few late arrivals seemed to settling into their seats, adding to the already crowded dais.

Scorpius met James' eyes as he resumed his seat. "So?" he prodded pointedly.

James shook his head. "I'm not sure I'm supposed to say."

"Did Flitwick forbid you?"

James blinked. "Not really, I guess."

"Then tell," Deidre prodded, leaning in. "What's so important that it can't wait for the first day of class?"

James briefly described his conversation with Flitwick and the strangely unmoving portrait of the deceased Headmaster. Out of respect for the Professor, however, he left out the revelation of Flitwick's goblin lineage. If the professor wanted everyone to know about that, James figured he would announce it himself. To James' surprise, no one else seemed particularly interested in the Merlin portrait.

"So Flitwick can paint, eh?" Deidre commented, grabbing a roll as the tables suddenly filled with laden golden plates and steaming tureens. "That old hinkypunk's just full of surprises, isn't he?"

"Not surprising at all, really," Rose said speculatively from across the table. "He's a creative type. You can just tell, can't you?"

"If you say so, Sybil," Scorpius scoffed, shaking his head.

"Don't call me that," Rose bristled. "You know how I feel about her class."

"But," James clarified, bringing the conversation back to the point, "Flitwick couldn't make Merlin's portrait come alive."

Nearby, Joseph Torrance shrugged. “So he isn’t that great of a portrait artist. Big deal. They’ll probably just bring in a professional to finish the job.”

Rose frowned toward the front of the hall and pointed, interrupting James’ retort. “Is that... the Minister of Magic?” she asked doubtfully.

James turned to look. Sure enough, seating himself between Professor DeBellows and a thin, severe-looking man that James didn’t recognize was the Minister of Magic, Loquacious Knapp. James had met the Minister on several occasions, of course, during visits to the Ministry with his dad. He’d never been particularly impressed with the Minister, who was slight, perpetually smiling and endlessly talking while never saying anything particularly important.

Scorpius answered, “That’s him, all right. And unless he’s going to be our new headmaster himself, I’d say he’s here to introduce that cheerful-looking fellow next to him.”

“You think?” Deidre asked, frowning toward the head table. “I heard it was going to be Professor Longbottom. He’s already been passed up for the post before. It’s his turn, isn’t it?”

“The Ministry sees things differently,” Rose sniffed disapprovingly. “My mum says they think Professor Longbottom’s too stuck in the past. Not ‘forward thinking’ enough.”

James glanced at his cousin. “She doesn’t agree with them, does she?”

Rose rolled her eyes impatiently. “Don’t be stupid. She’s argued with the people at the Ministry all along about it, even back when they gave the post to Merlin. She threatened to quit if they didn’t at least interview Professor Longbottom for the job this time.”

“Did they?” Graham asked, raising his eyebrows.

Rose nodded curtly. “They did. It took all of five minutes. They’d already made up their minds, although they were very tight-lipped about it. Haven’t told anyone who their final choice is. What about your dad, James? Was he in on any of this?”

James shook his head. “Dad hasn’t discussed his job much at all over the past few weeks. Seems things have been unusually quiet since the raid earlier this summer. He’s spent most of his time on that stupid inquiry.”

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Graham shook his head. “I thought that was just a formality, the whole inquiry thing into what happened on the Night of the Unveiling? Those busybodies in the American Muggle Integration Bureau demanded it, right? Can’t believe they let Muggles tell them how to run their wizarding world.”

“They don’t tell them how to run it,” Rose replied, annoyed. “Don’t talk about things you don’t know anything about.”

Graham’s brow darkened. “Well, they demanded the Ministry look into Harry Potter’s involvement in it all, didn’t they? They got what they wanted, and then some. My dad says it seems like those M. I. B. people have an awful load of power where they shouldn’t. I mean come off it, Weasley, they’re Muggles *and* they’re American. Who are they to tell us what to do?”

Rose narrowed her eyes. “They’re the people who had an entire wizarding city broadcast to the Muggle world by a rogue English witch. Call them what you want, but they probably have a bit of a legitimate complaint, don’t you think?”

Graham scoffed and raised a finger to argue, but was interrupted by Scorpius’ lazy drawl.

“At the moment I care less about international relations and more about that curious object behind the head table. Or hadn’t any of you noticed it yet?”

James looked again. Sure enough, high above the heads of the teachers was a large covered object, apparently affixed to the wall just below the ornate rose window. The object was bulky, entirely hidden by a thick black cloth. As James gazed at it, something seemed to be moving slightly behind the cloth. There was a faint rhythm to it, subtly disturbing the black draping.

“I assume that wasn’t there last year?” he ventured.

Rose shook her head, her brow knitted. “No. And I don’t like it.”

“You don’t even know what it is,” James commented, but without much conviction.

At that moment, Professor McGonagall stood up, pushing her chair back from the head table. As always, her long face was severe behind a pair of tiny spectacles. Her peaked hat shadowed her brow and James thought she looked noticeably older than the last time he’d seen her. The

hall descended into muttering quiet as she approached the podium and tapped it several times with her wand, commanding attention.

“Thank you,” she said curtly, her eyes ticking keenly over the assembly. “And welcome back to Hogwarts. You will find much changed this year, and I suppose we must deem this only fitting, considering the many changes that are occurring outside of these walls. To illuminate us further on the subject, may I present the Minister of Magic, Loquacious Knapp.”

A scattering of applause echoed from the walls. The Minister stood, nodding and smiling as he sidled around the head table. James noticed that Professor McGonagall did not applaud, nor did she smile as she stepped aside, allowing the Minister to assume the podium.

“Welcome, students,” Knapp beamed, his natural orator’s voice booming throughout the Hall. “Welcome back to Hogwarts. As your beloved Professor has already said, there are many changes afoot this year. I have every confidence that you will embrace these changes in the same spirit of bravery and enlightenment that has always been the hallmark of this, our finest magical institution.”

At this, a ripple of mutterings spread over the assembly. Heads bowed and whispers hissed.

“I’m not sure I can hear him,” Scorpius muttered, “with all this smoke getting blown up my robe.”

“There is no reason to be concerned,” Knapp went on, dropping his smile and assuming a paternal demeanor. “Many of you have heard rumours of things that are happening in the world, Muggle and magical alike. These are uneasy times, to be sure. But allow me to declare with confidence that none of you need worry. Much of what you hear is, as always, mere rumour and fear-mongering. Let us stand fast in resisting the tide of our lesser instincts. Know that your leaders are firmly unified, working, as always, toward the greater good. You, students, may do your part. Study. Learn. Mature. Grow into the exemplary citizens we all know you can be. If you accomplish this, the future, as always, will take care of itself.”

Knapp beamed again as another round of tepid applause spread through the hall, led from the head table by Professors Kendrick DeBellows and Lucia Heretofore, the Potions Mistress and head of Slytherin House. Hagrid, James saw, clapped dutifully but unsmiling, his beetle-black eyes locked unflinchingly on the Minister.

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As the applause died, Knapp lowered his gaze mournfully. “Alas, due to unfortunate events, Headmaster Merlinus Ambrosius, whom we were only privileged to know for two short years, has been taken from us. We shall miss him and his unique guidance. And yet, as we move on in his honour, we embrace a new day. Allow me to introduce to you your new Headmaster, Lord Rechter Strangways Grudje!”

With this, the Minister burst into wild applause, leading the assembly. He turned and grinned at the man he had been seated next to, who half-stood and raised a long, pale hand. Grudje was thin, with sallow cheeks, bushy grey eyebrows, and long, lank sheets of steely hair. He doffed his peaked hat stiffly and cinched his mouth laboriously upwards at the corners.

“Grudje?” Rose rasped, leaning over the table toward James. “Who the bloody hell is he? You ever heard of him?”

James shook his head, not taking his eyes from the scarecrow of a man. “No. What’s he trying to do with his face? Is that supposed to be a smile?”

Scorpius grimaced. “If so, it looks like he learned how to do it from a poorly translated instruction book.”

“Yes,” Knapp went on, still grinning toward Grudje as he sank back into his seat. “Mr. Grudje has been of invaluable service in many corners of the wizarding world. He brings a lifetime of dedication and mastery to the office of headmaster, and I am certain that you will soon come to think of him with the greatest of admiration and, yes, even affection.”

“Unlikely,” Graham mumbled with feeling. “Bloke looks like somebody’s warmed-over nightmare.”

Rose elbowed him sharply. “Give him a chance. Looks aren’t everything,” she rasped.

“And now,” Knapp proclaimed, turning back to the gathered students and gripping the podium with both hands. “On to the most exciting new detail of this school term. As many of you are aware, certain... world events have occurred. While we in the Ministry can assure you that any unwelcome repercussions of these events are even now being sufficiently addressed, it has become incumbent upon us all to consider, more than ever before in our lives, what it means to be witches and wizards living amongst our Muggle brethren. For centuries, we have had the benefit of knowing about them, while they have known us only

via myth and superstition. The vow of secrecy is nearly a thousand years old. And yet, it behooves us, if not to question it, then to ask ourselves: what might our lives be like without it?"

At this, again, the room broke apart into harsh whispers. Across from James, Rose merely looked sidelong at him, her brow knitted. On the other side of the Hall, several of the older Slytherin students broke into hearty, grim-faced applause. Albus, James was dismayed to see, joined them.

"Students," Knapp called out, overriding the increasing whispers. "Students, attend. This must be more than a merely intellectual exercise. A time of great change may well be upon us. It is essential that we all prove ourselves, not only as witches and wizards, but as citizens of the world. With that endeavour before us, I am pleased to reintroduce a program that has not been seen since the days of your great-great grandfathers. For the first time in nearly two hundred years, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, along with the Ministry of Magic and the cooperating bodies of three other magical governments, will offer intra-academic exchange classes with four other schools from around the world. In the spirit of international brotherhood, Ladies and gentlemen, I give you--" here, the Minister turned and gestured grandly with his right arm. "Durmstrang!"

An explosion of dark green smoke erupted between the dais and the head of the Slytherin table. Nolan Beetlebrick, a seventh year Slytherin, leapt backwards, shoving two first years to the floor in an untidy jumble. As the smoke diffused across the hall, smelling vaguely of moss and wood fire, a dark shape resolved out of it. It was a large box, nine feet high, covered in angles and leering shapes. It was, in fact, an enormous, baroquely designed cabinet, constructed of polished wood the colour of seaweed. Its doors were shut tight, gleaming darkly in the candlelight.

Knapp gestured again, this time toward the head of the Hufflepuff table. "Beauxbatons!" he announced proudly.

Another burst of smoke leapt into the air, this time powder blue and lilac-scented. A second cabinet resolved out of the smoke, this one pale white with golden scrollwork and tapered, rounded sides. The students began to applaud now, somewhat confusedly but with growing anticipation.

"Alma Aleron!" Knapp bellowed, gesturing once again.

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A burst of deep red smoke, smelling strangely of fireworks and cut grass, exploded before the Ravenclaw table. The Alma Aleron cabinet was as square and tall as monolith, lacquered in gleaming walnut brown, its closed doors decorated with twin carved eagles. The applause continued, increasing steadily in volume.

“And finally, last but by no means least,” Knapp concluded, gesturing toward the head of the Gryffindor table, “Perhaps the most important and unique school of them all, Yorke Finishing Academy, Bristoll!”

The final burst of smoke was white as steam. It had no discernible scent that James could tell. As the cloud drifted upward, the wardrobe revealed within it was really not a cabinet at all. It was smaller, made of dull grey metal, and ranged with a set of four narrow doors, vented at the top.

The applause began to peter out in general confusion.

“Yorke Finishing Academy?” a voice muttered from the Ravenclaw table. James saw that it was Fiona Fourcompass, her lip curled in vague disgust. “Never heard of it.”

“What is that thing?” another voice whispered. “That’s not like any wardrobe I’ve ever seen.”

From the dais, Knapp raised his hands, calling attention once more. “These, students, are portals. Each one will take you, at the appropriate time, to the school that it represents. There, you will attend classes, meet new people, and develop an appreciation for the interconnected web that is the world we live in. Furthermore, students from each of these four schools will be joining you here. You will see them in your classes, in the halls, and even at our social functions. I trust that you will represent yourselves well, and quite possibly forge friendships that will last for many years to come.”

As Knapp finished, the Great Hall swelled with a babble of voices. Questions were shouted toward the podium, but Knapp waved them away with a smile.

“For the remaining details,” he bellowed, “I leave you in the very capable hands of your new headmaster. Enjoy your adventures abroad, ladies and gentlemen, and do us proud!”

With that, Knapp backed away from the podium, still beaming and waving as the students erupted into fresh throes of excited confusion. Headmaster Grudje, James noticed, had arisen from his seat. He stood

nearly a head taller than the Minister of Magic as he stepped around him, approaching the podium stoically. He did not attempt to speak over the babbling throng, but simply stared out over the tables, his face as grim and cool as a gravestone, his grey eyes unmoving, seemingly fixed on the far wall. Slowly, eventually, the Hall quieted, settling into a sort of strained, expectant silence.

When Grudje finally spoke, his voice was very deep, grating like millstones in a well. “You will each,” he stated mildly, in a near monotone, “sign up for no more than four and no less than two classes at the school or schools of your choice. Classes will earn the appropriate grade in the equivalent Hogwarts subject, except in the case of Yorke Finishing Academy, which will be handled appropriately by Professor Grenadine Curry.” He paused and lowered his eyes, peering slowly around the crowded house tables. “As the better of you have hopefully already realized,” he went on a bit less severely, “most of these schools occupy very different time zones than do we. For your convenience, I have arranged for a small gift to the school, a very old tool, used under identical circumstances in centuries past, which will guide you as necessary to your various international appointments.”

Here, Grudje turned slowly. Unlike the Minister of Magic, the new headmaster’s gesture was slow, deliberate, and eerily powerful. He extended an open hand toward the black-draped object below the rose window. Then, with a snap of his fist, the cloth fell away, billowing down behind the head table. Every eye in the hall watched.

It was a clock unlike any clock James had ever seen. It was easily as tall as the headmaster himself, made of polished black wood and carved with a mind-boggling array of designs, curlicues and symbols. There was one large face, white as the moon and adorned with ornate black hands showing the current time (this face was labelled “HOGWARTS” in glowing blue letters). Four smaller faces surrounded the main face, each of these showing a different time and labelled with the names of the four other schools. Behind the largest face, ticking and whirring busily, was a mass of gears, cogs and flywheels, protected by a daunting iron padlock affixed to a hasp on the hinged clock face. An enormous brass pendulum hung from the bottom of the clock, swaying ponderously from left to right.

“That,” Deidre breathed in awe, “has to be the most gloriously ugly thing I have ever seen.”

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“I trust your instructions are quite clear,” Grudje said, turning slowly back to the house tables. “Are there any questions?”

Despite the clamouring of voices mere moments earlier, the Great Hall now remained nervously quiet. Somehow, it seemed that, despite everyone’s curiosity, no one felt quite prepared to engage the new headmaster. James glanced around, waiting for a hand to go up. Finally, with a hard swallow, he raised his own.

Grudje saw this and his eyes, if it were possible, both narrowed and sparkled. “Mr. Potter, then,” he growled. “Do go on, young man.”

“I, er... I think some of us might be wondering, sir...” James stammered, shifting his gaze from Grudje to the strange metal locker at the end of the Gryffindor table, “I mean, I myself have never heard of any school called Yorke Finishing Academy. Can you, maybe, tell us what magical government it’s connected to?”

Grudje stared hard at James for a long moment. “Mr. Potter, I am surprised at you,” he said in his deep, rattling voice. “Yorke Academy is not connected to any magical government. Yorke Academy will earn you credits with Professor Curry, you may recall. Madam Curry is your professor of Muggle Studies. Yorke Academy, you will therefore not be surprised to learn, Mr. Potter... is a Muggle school.”



“This isn’t a wee little change,” Deidre hissed as the assembly broke up and drained into the Entrance Hall. “It’s a bloody upheaval! Muggles in Hogwarts!? Wait ‘til I tell my mum and dad!”

“What are *we* supposed to learn at a *Muggle* school?” Graham complained in a shrill whisper. “How to be a lot of boring, telly-watching... car driving...” He waved his hands vaguely, “Er...non-broom-flying, wandless--”

“Shut *up*, Graham,” Rose hissed at him, pushing her way through the crowded Entrance Hall.

A sort of dull shock hovered over the entire gathering as they funnelled, murmuring in agitation, toward an arrangement of four large, framed parchments hung opposite the main entrance. Written across the tops of each parchment in flowing script were the names of the four schools. Beneath the names were listings of that school’s available classes, with spaces for students to sign up for them.

“Here, Ralph, make a way for us,” James said, pushing the bigger boy in front of him and using him as a battering ram to press through the throng. Ralph shouldered uncomfortably toward the front of the group, coming out near the Durmstrang parchment. James peered around his friend. No one had signed up for any classes yet. In fact, most of the attention was being focussed on the Muggle school’s sign-up sheet. At the edge of the crowd, Fiona Fourcompass was staring with unmasked distaste.

“‘Algebra two’,” she read, her voice dripping with disdain. “What kind of daft subject is that?”

“And how about this one?” Trenton Block called out, pointing, “‘History of the United Kingdom’! What, without any mention of the Goblin uprising? Or the War of the Red Mages? More like ‘History as the Muggles know it, with all the good bits chopped off.’”

More voices called out derisively, blending into a tirade. Scorpius suddenly pushed past James and approached the sign-up sheet for Yorke Academy, scratching his chin thoughtfully.

“Here’s one,” he called, glancing back over his shoulder with a half-grin and pointing with his quill. “‘Biology Studies’. I’ve heard about such things. They study dead animals by cutting them up into smaller and smaller bits. Hearts and lungs, muscles and tendons, eyeballs and brains...” He turned back to the sign-up sheet and sucked the tip of his quill speculatively. “Bloody hell, sign me up.”

With that, he stepped forward and signed his name to the parchment, underlining it with a scribbled flourish. The crowd pressed forward in his wake, babbling rather more tentatively. Rose and James exchanged quick looks.

“He likes to push people’s buttons,” she said quietly.

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“Yours, I’d wager,” James nodded, suppressing a grin. She punched him hard on the shoulder and whisked away, toward the Beauxbatons parchment.

Ralph approached James. “We could sign up for something at Alma Aleron. Maybe get a class with Zane, eh?”

James nodded enthusiastically. “Perfect! I’ll try to raise him on the Shard and see what he’s taking this year. Then we can sign up tomorrow morning before breakfast.”

Agreed, both boys stepped forward and scanned the other parchments. After a short consideration, they each signed up for a class at Durmstrang (*Practical Prophecy*, the Durmstrang equivalent of Divination) and were just scrawling their names to a class at Beauxbatons when Rose appeared again, peering around James’ shoulder.

“You’re not *actually* signing up for Theoretical Arithmancy?” she said archly.

“Just done it,” James answered, admiring his name on the parchment. “It allows us to avoid any Arithmancy classes here with Professor Shert. Any time I can avoid him, I will.”

“I considered staying in the States this year just to get out of his class,” Ralph nodded.

“Do either of you have the slightest idea what Theoretical Arithmancy even is?” Rose asked, cocking her head and arching an eyebrow.

James and Ralph glanced at each other and shrugged.

Rose nodded curtly and smiled. “See you in class, then!” She turned breezily and marched off toward the stairs.

Ralph frowned in her direction. “Maybe we should start checking with her before we do anything.”

James shook his head in annoyance. “Ignore her. She doesn’t know any more than we do. Come on, let’s go see what’s left at the Muggle school.”

The two drifted toward the last parchment, which was now surprisingly full of names. The crowd still hovered near it, chattering with mingled curiosity and scorn.

“At least it’ll be an easy O.W.L.,” Joseph Torrance commented, signing his own name to the parchment. “No matter what crazy Muggle subject we take, it just counts for Muggle Studies. We can nap through every class if we want.”

James nodded uneasily. He leaned toward Ralph. "You think any of this would be happening if it wasn't for Night of the Unveiling?"

Ralph shook his head. "My dad says the whole magical world is teetering on the edge. The Vow of Secrecy is cracked. People are keeping quiet now mostly out of habit, but it can't last forever. It makes sense to be prepared."

"But... this is what *they've* always wanted," James whispered. "All those Progressive Element rabble-rousers like Tabitha Corsica-- they've been pushing for revelation of the wizarding world forever, just so they can finally take over the Muggle world without any interference from their own magical governments. They're going to get their way if the Vow of Secrecy totally falls apart."

"Well," Ralph shrugged, "If this is what the P.E. have always wanted, it's Petra who handed it to them on a silver platter."

James sighed darkly. He didn't want to be reminded of that.

Ralph stepped forward. "Might as well jump in, eh?" he said, producing a quill. He scanned the mostly filled parchment. "How about... physical education?"

James shook his head dourly. "Whatever. I don't have the slightest idea what that is."

Ralph signed his name to the parchment. "You want I should put you down, too?"

"I don't care. Just hurry up. I want to go see if we can raise Zane on the Shard."

Ralph scribbled James' name on the Yorke parchment.

"I need to get down to the dungeon," he said, turning. "First night is always a big deal, and I have to admit, I sort of missed the old place. Want to come down for a bit? Things have got to be a little less hinky now that Corsica's gone, along with most of her Fang and Talons.

James shook his head. "Thanks. I should get upstairs and make sure Lily gets settled in all right. Besides, er--" he stopped himself, realizing he was about to mention the mysterious package from his father. "Er... I should unpack. Get settled in. You know."

Ralph nodded, distracted. "It's good to be back, isn't it? Despite everything."

James agreed, but couldn't help feeling a resurgence of the vague dread he had sometimes felt during the previous year. Things were changing so fast that even Hogwarts felt different. He bid Ralph

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goodnight at the staircase and trotted up, following a group of excited, gawking first years. As they passed the Heracles window, James was pleased, in spite of his worries, to see that the stained glass visage of Heracles still bore a sneaking resemblance to Scorpius Malfoy. Some things, he mused wryly, would likely never change.

The landing outside the Gryffindor common room was crowded with younger students, most arguing and shouting at the Fat Lady as she sat primly inside her frame, looking stubbornly away. James spied Heth Thomas, a fifth year and long-time Gryffindor Beater, leaning against the wall nearby. He glanced up as James approached.

“None of them know the password,” Heth explained with a shrug.

James blinked and glanced at the portrait. “Who’s got the password, then?”

“New Prefect, I guess.”

“So where might he be?” James asked, scanning the crowd.

“You’re talking to him,” Heth grinned, producing a shiny badge from his robes and holding it up. “Who’d have guessed, eh?”

James glanced at the badge, then at the taller boy. “So then, Mr. Prefect... can I have the new password?”

“I was just waiting for somebody to ask,” Heth replied, pushing away from the wall. “Step aside everyone! New Prefect coming through, and I don’t mean Potter here, although you can thank him for knowing authority when he sees it. That’s it. Form a nice single-file line or something.”

Heth pushed through the disgruntled throng and stood up straight before of the portrait of the Fat Lady.

“Prantzvigor!” he announced firmly.

“About bloody time,” the Fat Lady muttered, swinging open and revealing the noise and warmth of the familiar common room.

“It’s a Bulgarian energy stimulant,” Heth explained as the crowd shoved him and James forward. “I’m trying to get my hands on a batch for the Quidditch season. If you decide to show up this year, maybe you can try it out for yourself.”

“I’ll be there,” James said firmly, stepping toward the fireplace as the throng clambered into the already crowded room.

Heth nodded sceptically, but his reply was drowned out by a sudden burst of shrill song. James turned curiously at the noise, and then

realized that the anthem was aimed at him. Cameron Creevey stood beneath a home-made banner bearing the words “WELCOME BACK JAMES” in glowing golden letters. Flanking Cameron were half-a-dozen young Gryffindors, all grinning at James as they sang. James was grateful not to be able to understand most of the lyrics, but the chorus was clear enough as they reached it and redoubled their volume: “A Potter’s back in Gryffindor! It never was the same! We missed him here in Gryffindor! And Potter is his name!”

James eyes widened with mortification. He glanced around the room in panic and saw the older students looking on with expressions of wry amusement or mild annoyance.

“Cameron!” James called, rushing toward the group and raising his hands, but the small chorus mistook his movements. They surged forward, clustering around him and joining hands, hemming him in as they finished the song. James tried to shout over them, but they merely grinned happily, bouncing and thronging about him. Finally, the song petered out and James allowed his arms to flop to his sides.

“Welcome back, James!” Cameron cried, nearly vibrating with delight. “I hope you liked it! We worked on the song by owl over the past few weeks, me and Stanton and Shivani. We couldn’t practice, really, but I was hoping...”

James disengaged himself from the group, his cheeks going crimson as he backed away. “Sure, Cam. Er, thanks, I guess. Just don’t, you know... for Merlin’s sake don’t sing it anymore.”

Cameron’s brow furrowed for a moment, and then cleared as another thought seemed to strike him. “We want to hear all about what happened last term in the States!” he rasped suddenly, his whisper so shrill that it carried through the entire room. “You were there, right? You were in the middle of it all on the Night of the Unveiling! What was it like? Did you know she was going to do it? Did you see Headmaster Merlin try to stop her?”

James continued to back away, his hands raised. “Cameron, I don’t... I can’t really talk about--”

“Yeah,” someone else called out. James glanced toward the voice and saw a tall, handsome boy he didn’t recognize. “Tell us, Potter. What sort of hero you were that night. What did you do to stop your girlfriend from ruining a thousand years of magical secrecy?”

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James boggled at the boy speechlessly. He realized with sinking horror that the common room had fallen uncomfortably quiet. Scorpius stood in the entranceway alongside Rose, her eyes tense and wary.

“Lay off him, Lance,” Heth Thomas said mildly, plopping into a large arm-chair. “James doesn’t have to explain himself to any of us. Do you, James?”

“Yeah,” the handsome boy, Lance, agreed, narrowing his eyes at James. “He’s a *Potter*.”

James wanted to sink right into the natty red carpet of the common room. His cheeks were burning, and he realized it was only partly with embarrassment. His hands were clenched into fists at his sides, so tightly that they felt like rocks. With a force of will, he loosened them.

Voices began to fill the common room again as the moment thankfully passed.

“Sorry, James,” Cameron whispered next to him. “We didn’t mean to cause any trouble. We just wanted to...”

James shook his head. “It’s all right, Cam. I guess. Just... no more songs, okay?”

At a corner table, Lily caught James’ eye. He began to approach, but she quickly glanced away.

“Maybe give her a little room,” Rose muttered at James’ elbow, pulling him away, toward the fire. “After all that, she may not want to remind everyone whose sister she is just now.”

“Let go,” James grumbled, yanking his elbow away, but following his cousin toward the fire. “Who’s that Lance git, anyway?”

“Lance Vassar,” Rose whispered. “Transferred last year from Bragdon Wand.”

“Bragdon Wand? The snooty private school? That explains why he’s such an ass. What’s *he* know about Petra or anything that happened last term?” he turned on Rose, glaring at her. “And what’s he doing calling her my girlfriend?” he hissed angrily. “I should have hexed him right on the spot!”

“It’s just a joke, James,” Rose answered without meeting his gaze. “Ever since you and Petra played lovers in the Triumvirate...”

“Have a seat, Potter,” Scorpius advised pointedly, directing James to the sofa.

“No,” James spat, shoving Scorpius’ hand away. “I’ve only been back for five bloody minutes and already there’s drama all over the place. Is this how it’s going to be all year?”

Scorpius rolled his eyes and turned away. “Fine. Stand there, then.” He plopped onto the sofa and glanced back at James. “But I did warn you, if you recall.”

“What’s that supposed to mean,” James demanded, scowling.

“Before you left last term,” Scorpius answered. “I told you not to let your feelings for Petra Morganstern get in the way. I told you to watch out, because fate has a way of plopping you Potters right on the bulls-eyes of history.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” James seethed in a low voice.

“James,” Rose whispered, trying to move between them, but James shook his head, still looking directly into Scorpius’ eyes.

Scorpius met James’ look. “I’ll tell you what I do know, Potter,” he said evenly. “I know that people have gotten pretty used to Potters saving the day. It’s natural for them to be a little disappointed with the first Potter who ruins everything.”

James could hardly believe what he was hearing. He boggled at the blond boy, his hands snapping into fists again.

“We don’t mean it that way, James,” Rose began, but James rounded on her once more.

“We?!” he repeated furiously. “You’re on *his* side?”

“We don’t *agree* with it,” Rose rasped, trying to pull James down onto the sofa. “It’s just that nobody really knows what happened on the Night of the Unveiling. We know more than the rest, but even still. You helped her. Petra couldn’t have done what she did without you and Ralph and Zane. It wasn’t your fault, but not everybody sees it that way...”

James was shaking his head in bewildered anger. “I don’t believe this,” he said softly. “None of you understand. None of you know what you’re talking about. Judith was just *using* Petra. The Lady of the Lake was behind the whole thing...”

“But, James...” Rose insisted uncomfortably, “Nobody else *saw* this Lady of the Lake person. Not even your dad. It’s not that we don’t believe you, but try to imagine how it looks to the rest of us. The entire wizarding world was exposed by *Petra Morganstern*. She’s been declared

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the first *International* Undesirable Number One in decades. She's still out there, and nobody knows what she's going to do next, or what she's even capable of."

James couldn't listen anymore. He turned away from his cousin, rage and misery clenching his throat and jaw, and stomped up the steps to the boys' dormitory without another word.

If there was one thing he had not been able to predict, it was the fact that the true villain in this whole nightmare, the Lady of the Lake-- who had manipulated Petra, broken into the Vault of Destinies, and ultimately killed brave young cousin Lucy-- would escape attention completely. No one, save for James himself, Ralph and Zane, had apparently ever seen her. James' persistent attempts to explain Judith and her vicious plot to the people in authority had been an exercise in frustration. His father believed him, but the Ministry in general did not, and there was only so much Harry Potter could do without the full backing of his superiors. A few people, including Titus Hardcastle, his father's auror partner, had gone so far as to suggest that James' memory of Judith might merely have been an illusion, projected by Petra herself, in a devious attempt to deflect blame. Titus did not hide his disbelief in the Lady of the Lake, nor his single-minded intention to capture Petra at any cost.

Titus was not alone. As Rose had said, every magical government in the world was looking for Petra, with orders to subdue her immediately, by any means necessary. No one would underestimate her mysterious power again, even if the source of her power was a complete mystery.

James knew Petra's secret, though. She had confirmed it to him on the Night of the Unveiling. She was a sorceress; perhaps the first of her kind to ever walk the earth. She wasn't evil, he knew (or at least desperately hoped). But she was indeed very powerful, and her power was corruptible. The Lady of the Lake had used it, manipulated it, and if she had her way, she would do it again.

"There's nothing I can do about that," James muttered angrily to himself, throwing his knapsack onto his four poster bed and plopping down next to it. The circular dormitory room was thankfully empty. Raucous voices echoed dimly up the steps from the common room. James thought he could hear Lily's laughter. "It's not my problem. Who cares if the rest of them don't believe me? I don't need them."

It wasn't true, of course. Even he knew that.

He dug roughly through his trunk and found the Shard wrapped in a thick hank of white cloth. He unwrapped it impatiently and tossed the cloth aside. The magical mirror showed only silvery smoke, rolling densely and endlessly, as if it was a portal to the inside of a storm cloud. This mirror was the twin of the one Merlinus Ambrosius had given James last year. That one was still back in the States, entrusted to Zane Walker, one of James' best friends. Both mirrors had once been part of a whole, the monstrously powerful (yet capricious) Amsera Cyrth, which had belonged to Merlin himself until he had deemed it too potentially dangerous. Broken into equal parts, the Shards' powers were now limited only to communication. James' Shard had originally been given to his father, but it was no longer needed for its original purpose (portable communication from the States to Ministry headquarters). Now, it served as a connection to Zane at the American magical school of Alma Aleron.

"Magic mirror, shard of three," James muttered, "Show me what I wish to see."

The face of the Shard began to clear, revealing the interior of a dim room. James peered closely into the glass. The room was tiny and cluttered, with a steeply canted ceiling, covered with posters and banners, over a single window. A lumpy heap beneath the window revealed itself to be a bed covered with assorted clothing, mounds of blankets and pillows, open textbooks, and an impressive collection of empty licorice soda bottles. James palmed his forehead, remembering the time change. It was barely afternoon in America. Zane wasn't in his dormitory room on the top floor of Alma Aleron's Zombie House. The yellow and black zombie banner-- an X-eyed skull with its tongue stuck out-- was draped over the window, blocking out the light. From the angle of view, it appeared that Zane had hung his Shard on the door. James sighed in annoyance, knowing he would get no answers tonight about what classes Zane was taking this term.

Just then, something in the far-off dorm room caught James' eye: a faint glow, just at the very edge of the dim scene. He squinted at it, involuntarily turning and twisting his own Shard, as if he could somehow alter the view on the other end. The glow seemed to emanate from a battered whiteboard hung opposite the canted ceiling. Notes and doodles were scribbled on it, their magical ink glowing a faint green in the gloom. There was an unflattering sketch of Professor Jackson (of course) and a

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few snippets of rude limericks. Beneath this, printed in messy capital letters, was a note, apparently a reminder to Zane himself: EXP COMM 10:15!!

James frowned at this for a few seconds until understanding dawned on him. Zane was part of a school program, headed by Chancellor Benjamin Franklyn, devoted to experimental magical communication. Apparently they would be meeting at ten-fifteen (there was no way to tell if that meant morning or night). Unfortunately it wasn't particularly useful information to James.

He considered knocking on the Shard in an attempt to wake Zane up, then, reluctantly, decided against it. He'd just have to try to catch Zane in the morning. Retrieving the white cloth, he wrapped the Shard again and buried it carefully in the bottom of his trunk. Restless and disgruntled, knowing he was not yet ready for sleep but unwilling to go back down to the common room, James began to change into his pyjamas. He reached to toss his knapsack onto the bedside table, and only then remembered the package from his father hidden inside.

Instantly, he plopped onto the bed again and rammed his arm into the knapsack, digging to the bottom. He felt the wrapped package, grasped it, and drew it out eagerly, shoving his knapsack unceremoniously to the floor.

He unwrapped the package messily, tossing the thick, rough paper aside.

It was a small, compact bundle, held together with a loop of string. James saw immediately what it was, and his eyes bulged in mingled surprise and confusion. It was his father's invisibility cloak. Scarcely believing what he was seeing, James turned it over and found a small note tucked under the knotted string. He grabbed it and unfolded it atop the bundled cloak.

James,

This is not a gift. It is a tool, and I mean you to use it only as I instruct you to. Things are afoot this year, and I may, at some point, ask you to be my eyes and ears there at Hogwarts. *If that happens*, the cloak will prove useful, as you well know. Until then, *keep it safe*. Hide it well. I am telling you this not only as your father, but as an auror.

And just to be sure, you will notice that I didn't include the Marauder's Map. I am keeping it handy, because as you may imagine, it works just as fine here on my desk as it does there at the school. With it, I will keep an eye on things as well as I can, not the least of which being you. Catch my meaning?

James caught his father's meaning. With the Marauder's Map, he could easily see where James was at any given time, thus, if James used the cloak for his own purposes, there was a good chance he'd get caught by his father, if no one else. *But*, James mused mischievously, *dad can't be watching all the time...*

There was more to the note:

I have an idea what it might be like for you this year, son. It's no fun being misunderstood and disbelieved. I know how it feels. Don't rail against it. Try to be patient with those who are truly seeking the truth. It will show itself, in time. Trust me on that, James.

Have a good term,
Dad

James reread the last few lines, frowning as he thought of Rose and Scorpius and all the rest down in the common room. Even Lily, his little sister, hadn't wanted to be seen with him. Perhaps his dad, the famous Harry Potter, did know what it was like to be disbelieved and ridiculed, even by those closest to him. But somehow that didn't make James feel any better.

He began to fold the note, then thought better of it. Instead, he placed the note on his bedside table and produced his wand.

"Incendio," he said quietly, keeping the spell as weak as possible. A spot of flame shot from his wand and consumed the parchment, reducing it to a crinkled film of ash. James blew on it, dispersing the ashes into a fine, black cloud. He nodded with satisfaction; if he was going to serve as his father's auror spy, he mused, he might as well do it all the way.

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James carefully hid the invisibility cloak in the bottom of his trunk and locked it tight. Then, he finished getting himself ready for bed, stripped back the covers of his four poster, flopped down full length on the mattress, and lay there, completely awake, staring at the dim ceiling.

He thought of the invisibility cloak.

Gradually, the echoing voices from the common room diminished. Joseph Torrance and Graham Warton ambled up to the dormitory, laughing and talking in low voices. James pretended to be asleep. Shortly thereafter, Scorpius clumped up the stairs. James watched with slitted eyes, his anger at the blond boy resurging. Somehow, Scorpius was still bunking with Gryffindors a year older than him, just as he had during his first year, when the other first years had frozen him out of their floor.

Scorpius glanced toward James and seemed to know that he was awake. James rolled over pointedly, turning his back on him.

Eventually, all the candles were put out. The excited beginning-of-term mutterings of James' fellow Gryffindors (not including Scorpius, who preferred to don his glasses and read rather than interact with his fellow dorm-mates) descended into silence.

Still James could not sleep. He flopped onto his back and stared at the ceiling again.

He thought of the invisibility cloak.

Dad wouldn't possibly be watching tonight, he thought.

A moment later, he kicked off his covers and clambered quietly out of bed.





2. "BROTHERHOOD & TOLERANCE"

The common room was mostly deserted, the only light coming from the flickering remains of the fire. Devindar Das was seated on a loveseat near a window, his head close to fifth year Willow Wisteria, her long blonde hair burnished by the firelight. She giggled quietly and Devindar put his arm around her, drawing her close.

James tiptoed toward the portrait hole, hunkering low so that his feet would not be seen beneath the draping folds of the invisibility cloak. The portrait swung open with a small, prolonged creak, badly startling Devindar and Willow, who scrambled away from each other on the loveseat.

James peered back at them through the fabric of the cloak. They boggled toward him, unseeingly, watching the portrait hole to see who

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would emerge. Carefully, James crept through the entrance, feeling the strange prickle of their gaze as it passed through him.

“Maybe it’s one of the ghosts,” Willow whispered.

“If it’s Diggory pulling his Spectre of Silence routine,” Devindar grumbled, “I’ll kill myself just so I can pop him one.”

Willow giggled again as the portrait swung shut behind James. The Fat Lady was asleep in her frame, snoring her dainty little snore, her many chins on her breast.

James had no plan. He merely meant to wander the halls and perhaps clear his mind. He was still feeling disgruntled about Rose and Scorpius. Beneath his anger, however, what he felt most was hurt. He had expected them to believe him. It was one thing for the uppity-ups at the Ministry to doubt his explanation of the Lady of the Lake. People like them were famously sceptical of such things. But Rose was his cousin. She’d joined him and Ralph during their second year, when they had confronted the danger of the entity known as the Gatekeeper. How could she question his story now? How, even more, could she side with that obnoxious little squid Scorpius?

“She fancies him,” he spat under his breath as he descended a narrow, curving stair and entered a dark hall. “That’s all. Girls always lose their grip when they fancy a bloke.”

“Potter,” a quiet voice muttered on James’ right. “I should have known...”

James wheeled around under the cloak, scanning the hall, eyes wide. There was no one there.

“I can only assume by the halted footsteps,” the voice said tiredly, “that you are casting about stupidly, shocked to see no one nearby. How quickly you forget, although I cannot say that I am surprised. Take off that damned cloak, Potter.”

James frowned in consternation, turning this way and that. The corridor appeared utterly empty but for a crackling torch at the near intersection and an ancient statue of a hunchbacked wizard with a remarkably tall, complicated staff. James approached the statue tentatively, pushing the cloak back from his head but leaving it draped around his shoulders. He squinted at it, turning his head sideways. The statue’s eyes were so narrowed and puffy that they appeared to be swollen shut. James waved a hand in front of its stony face.

“Did you just...” he whispered doubtfully, “Did you just say something?”

“Over *here*, Potter,” the voice said with exaggerated annoyance.

James flinched again and followed the sound of the voice. To the left of the statue hung an enormous painting, principally showing a gaggle of wizards gathered around what appeared to be a clockwork dragon, half disassembled on a raised pedestal. Most of the wizards had abandoned the device for the night, snoozing against the walls and propped in high-backed chairs with their peaked hats pulled down to their noses. Leaning against an enormous cog in the background was a sharp-nosed character in a black robe, hidden mostly in shadow. The figure regarded James from beneath a lowered brow.

“Oh,” James said, stepping toward the portrait. “It’s you.”

“You will address me as Professor, Potter,” the disguised portrait of Severus Snape instructed coolly, “*Or* Headmaster. And you will return to your dormitory immediately or I will alert Mr. Filch to your typical inane mischief.”

James stepped a bit closer to the portrait. “I don’t think you’ll do that at all, Professor,” he whispered. “After all, I bet you want to keep all of your sneaky little portraits a secret, yes?”

“Threats, Mr. Potter?” Snape said. He sounded slightly more amused than angry. “Who would believe you? Surely not the new headmaster. Mr. Grudje, as you may already have ascertained, is not what anyone would call... particularly imaginative.”

“He’s a plank of wood, if you ask me,” James grumbled, shaking his head. “Why in the world would they put a dried up old mummy like him in charge of a school?”

“To keep petty miscreants like you in your place, I would think,” Snape sniffed approvingly. “I have high hopes for Mr. Grudje. I am, in fact, quite encouraged by your dislike of him. It is high time the office of headmaster was once again feared as well as respected.”

“Yeah, well, you would think that,” James replied pointedly. “From what I’ve heard you were about as loveable as a pile of doxie poo.”

Snape lowered his voice. “Popularity is almost as blinding as love, Mr. Potter. As you should know better than anyone.”

James bristled and pressed his lips together. Snape was referring to Petra, of course, trying to goad him. James opened his mouth to retort, but a sudden, jarring noise interrupted him. It was like a heavy sigh, or a

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loud, rattling breath, coming from just around the corner of the nearby intersection. James spun toward the intersection, eyes widening, but saw nothing.

“Go to bed, Potter,” Snape ordered dismissively, as if he had not heard the noise. “And if you must sneak about at night, do us all the service of wearing quieter footwear.”

James ignored him. A distinct chill crept involuntarily up his spine, wringing a hard shiver from his shoulders. He moved slowly toward the intersection, eyes wide, searching the shadows. There was only silence now. Nothing moved.

James stopped at the corner and peered around it slowly, tentatively. It was the first floor corridor that led toward the entrance hall. The main staircase could just be seen in the distance, across from the Great Hall.

“*Jaaaammmeesss....*” a voice hissed directly into his ear. He could feel the breath of it, harsh and cold and strangely wet. He scrambled away from it, away from its delighted laughter, and tripped over the invisibility cloak. It jerked from his shoulders and tangled around his feet, pulling him to the hard stone floor in a clumsy heap. Still the voice laughed, unseen, echoing aimlessly around the corridor. It was a feminine sound, but mad and chaotic. James’ blood chilled at the sound of it. He clambered away, crabwise, slipping and sliding on the cold floor. He realized dimly that it was wet. The invisibility cloak soaked up the dampness and slapped at him as he struggled to his feet. He began to run. His shoes smacked wetly on the floor.

He reached the entrance hall, still looking wildly back over his shoulder, and collided headlong with what felt like a football squad. There was a rasped “Oof!” and a flail of arms and legs, and suddenly James was on the ground again, toppling over a large, bulky figure.

There was a flurry of knees, elbows and cursing voices, and James suddenly found himself staring up at his brother, Albus.

“You great git!” Albus exclaimed suddenly, pointing down at him. “You stole it again!”

James gaped up at his brother. Dimly, he realized that he was lying partially atop someone else. The other person sat up with a moan, throwing James off.

“Ow,” Ralph said, gingerly pressing his palm to the corner of his jaw. “I think you dislocated something with that rock-hard head of yours, James. What in the world were you doing?”

“He was test driving the invisibility cloak, the thieving git!” Albus answered stridently, reaching down and grabbing at the cloak. “Got it all wet, too. Boy, is dad going to *murder* you.” Albus whistled appreciatively, obviously delighted.

“Did you--” James gasped, extricating himself from Ralph and clambering upright. “Did you hear the...” He realized he was panting. His heart was hammering a wild staccato in his chest, making him feel light-headed.

Albus ignored him. “I wouldn’t have expected it from you, James, but I’ve got to admit, I am impressed. You’re either braver than I thought or as stupid as I expected, because when mum and dad find out about this...”

“Dad gave it to me,” James hissed, yanking the cloak out of Albus’ hands. “He sent it to school with me. I didn’t steal it.”

“Right,” Albus nodded, “and I’m Myron Madrigal from Wizarding Wireless News. Care to give me an interview, Mister Worst-Liar-in-the-World?”

James rolled his eyes in exasperation. “I don’t care if you believe me or not. Ask dad if you want! Just tell me, did either of you hear a... er...” he glanced back the way he had come and gestured vaguely. “Er... anything... strange?”

“We heard somebody running along the corridor,” Ralph said, still poking and prodding at his jaw. “And then you came pelting out of nowhere like a cannonball with hair.”

“Knocked Ralph clean off his feet,” Albus grinned. “And that takes some doing. I’m glad I got to witness it. So what’s the deal, James? You got a teacher on your tail? One of the ghosts? Peeves?”

James shook his head, still staring back at the empty corridor. The floor was indeed shiny with water, but that was no longer a mystery. A large bucket and tiny mop stood next to the staircase, obviously left by one of the night-shift house elves. Was it possible that the voice had been one of the ghosts? Or even Peeves, playing an uncharacteristically vicious prank?

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“It was... nothing. I guess.” James muttered. He turned back to his brother and Ralph. “What are *you* two doing out of the dungeon, anyway?”

“*We’ve got permission,*” Albus said importantly, holding up a large golden skeleton key with the Slytherin crest emblazoned on it. “Professor Heretofore sent us for more snacks from the kitchens. Official house business.”

“First night,” Ralph nodded with a smile. “Like I said, it’s kind of a big deal for us Slytherins.”

“Let me guess,” Albus said, pocketing the golden key and stepping past James with a grin. “All the Gryffindors are snug in their little beds now, hmm? Sleeping the sleep of the just, poor saps. Ah, well.”

“Sod off,” James said tiredly. “I’m going back upstairs.”

Ralph turned as he began to follow Albus. “You want to come down with us for a bit?” he asked. “It’s just getting started. There’s going to be a spell-casting contest in the range. Winner gets to be head-of-house for a day.”

James shook his head. Suddenly he felt weary to the bone. “I better not. I’d hate to embarrass Albus. Besides, what would a Gryffindor do as head of Slytherin for a day?”

“Dream on, big brother,” Albus proclaimed loftily. “I could out-spell you with my wand-arm transfigured into a--”

He stopped as one of the doors of the Great Hall creaked slowly open, revealing the relative darkness inside. A figure stepped casually into view-- a girl about James’ age, with short purple hair, a round, impish face, and a diamond stud glittering on her nose. Her dark eyes fixed on James, Ralph and Albus for a moment, and then glanced away, ticking around the entrance hall.

“Ugh,” she said to herself, stepping out into the light. “It’s like an overgrown mausoleum.”

“Is she a student here?” Ralph asked tentatively, looking over her ratty jeans and black tank top.

“She has to be,” James replied. “Right?”

“You two are idiots,” Albus commented mildly, taking a step closer to the girl as she ambled across the entryway. “Hey you. Nose ring. If you don’t mind me asking, just who the bloody hell are you?”

The girl glanced back at Albus over her shoulder, an appraising look on her face. “What’s it to you?”

Albus blinked at her. "What's it to me? It's just that all of a sudden being out after-hours has turned into bleedin' King's Cross station. Now I'll admit I've been gone for a year, but *you* don't look familiar. You want to explain yourself before my mates and I take offense?"

The girl shook her head languidly and turned. "I'm Nastasia. Nice welcoming committee."

"Wait a minute," James said, stepping around Albus and approaching the girl, his head cocked. "I know you. Your accent... You're not a student here. You're... American."

"Got it in one, genius," the girl, Nastasia, replied, turning away. "These stairs go up to the dormitories, I suppose. And I bet *those* stairs go down to the dungeons. Yikes. You people really did get stuck in the middle ages."

"You're from Vampire house, aren't you?" James prodded, getting in front of the girl as she wandered the entrance hall, a small sneer curling her lips. "I think I had Mageography with you last year at Alma Aleron. Only you had pink hair then."

"You think I look like a Vampire?" the girl asked with sudden interest, turning toward James. "You really think that's my house? Am I the type? Do tell."

"W-well," James stammered, suddenly wilting before the girl's intense stare. He took a half-step backwards. "I mean... Vampires... I thought you were..."

"I'm a Pixie, Cornelius," she said, dropping her expression of feigned interest and poking James in the chest. "Don't forget it. I hate those pasty wannabes."

James took another step backwards as the girl spun away, stalking toward the parchment sign-up sheets along the far wall.

"She's mad," Ralph said out of the side of his mouth, approaching James from behind.

"She's sort of cute," Albus added, passing both of them. "So. Nastasia, is it? I assume you got here by way of those new Vanishing Cabinets, eh? Very intrepid of you. Care for a grand tour? I'm on official Hogwarts business, you know. Got the golden key and everything." He produced the pass key and wagged it at her.

"I remember what house *you* were in," Nastasia proclaimed suddenly, turning back toward James and pointing at him. "You were in

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Bigfoot. It was a good year for the Foots last year, wasn't it? From zero to hero in one semester. You must be very proud."

James nodded, still feeling a little off-kilter at the girl's conversational style. "I suppose. It was sort of a team thing. We--"

"I didn't ask for your life story, pal," she interrupted, waving a hand dismissively. She turned on the spot again and walked purposely back toward the doors of the Great Hall. "I've decided it's boring here. I won't be taking any of your classes." She stopped in front of Ralph and looked up at him. "You're a nice big boy, though, aren't you?"

"I'm in Slytherin," Ralph said immediately, his face going red as a brick.

"Good for you," she nodded, patting him on the arm and then strolling around him. "Well anyway, I'd hate to keep you all up. I'm sure it'll be leeches and boogwarts for everyone come breakfast time. Enjoy your..." she paused, glancing back around the entrance hall with obvious distaste. "er... *dankness*." She shrugged, turned, and swept through the partially open door into the darkened Great Hall.

"Wait a minute!" James rasped, darting toward the narrow opening, following the girl. "How did you get here? The Vanishing Cabinets are banned for student use until first lessons. Unless... are you on the Experimental Magical Communication thing? With Zane Walker?"

Without looking back, Nastasia answered in a sing-song voice, "I have no idea what you're talking about..." She was approaching the Alma Aleron cabinet, which stood partly open, showing a seamlessly black interior.

James trotted to catch up to her. "But... hold on just a minute! I want to ask you something!"

James really didn't have anything to ask her, but for some reason it seemed important to not let her go just yet. There was something very strange about her, not to mention rather overtly dodgy. She did stop though, directly in front of the Alma Aleron cabinet, one foot on its shadowy floor.

"What." She demanded impatiently.

James stopped a few feet away and stared at her. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, and then his gaze shifted slightly to the left. Something was lying on the immaculately cleared surface of the

head table. It was dark and rumpled, with a thick string attached to one end.

“Er...” he said, pointing toward the head table. “Is that... yours?”

He moved forward, past Nastasia and the Alma Aleron Cabinet, and climbed the steps of the dais. The object was a small black bag, made of some sort of very fine velvet. He picked it up curiously. It was empty.

“Is this,” he began to ask again, turning, but she was standing immediately behind him on the dais. Her face was level with his, calmly staring at him. The stud in her nose glittered by the moony light of the rose window.

“It’s mine,” she said, and jutted out her hand. James held the small bag for a moment longer, and then moved to give it to her. Her open hand, he noticed, was trembling. It was a subtle thing, but unmistakable. He looked back up at her face, curious and surprised. She exhaled impatiently and grabbed the bag, clenching it in her fist. She spun and trotted down the steps.

“You’re welcome,” James called, peeved.

Nastasia stopped at the Alma Aleron cabinet and glanced back up at him. She looked consideringly at him for a moment, and James thought she might apologize for her rudeness.

“Don’t push your luck, Cornelius,” she commented, almost affectionately. “You don’t want to get on a Pixie’s bad side.”

With that, she stepped into the cabinet. The door swung shut with a sharp clunk.

James shook his head in bemusement.

“She’s gone?” Albus rasped from the doors, making a half-hearted attempt to keep his voice down.

“I guess,” James answered, clumping down the steps of the dais and approaching the cabinet. He rounded it, facing the double doors with their trademark eagle insignias, and then heaved both doors open. The interior of the cabinet was dark and empty. A pair of brass coat-hooks glinted on the rear wall.

Ralph approached from between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables. “You going to chase her over?”

James shook his head again. “I don’t think I could if I tried. Who do you think she was? What in the world was she doing here?”

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“Being an obnoxious twit, that’s what,” Albus answered fervently. “Good riddance to her. At least she won’t be taking any classes here. Can’t handle our *dankness*. Pshh. *Americans*.”

James nodded, but remained quiet. He closed the Alma Aleron cabinet doors carefully.

Ten minutes later, he crept back through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor common room. It was after one in the morning and he was now officially exhausted. He tiptoed across the now-empty common room, slipping the invisibility cloak off as he went.

“Psst. James,” a voice whispered from near his feet. James jumped and swore out loud. It was the third time that night that someone had startled him with his own name. He turned toward the source of the whisper and was not quite astonished to see his father’s face looking up at him from the dying embers of the fire.

“Have a nice little roam?”

“Dad!” James hissed, half exasperated and half embarrassed. “You were watching *tonight*? Don’t you have a life?”

“I have a son that I know very well, that’s what I have,” Harry Potter said wryly. “I saw you leave about an hour ago, just as I thought you might. How’s Albus and Ralph.”

“Jolly as Jobberknolls,” James replied tersely, falling onto the couch.

His father seemed rather obviously pleased with himself. “And who, may I ask, is Nastasia Hendrix?”

James sighed wearily. “Nobody. She’s an American. She popped over to insult us a little, that’s all.”

Harry nodded a bit uncertainly, and then shook his head, apparently choosing not to pursue the subject. Perhaps he thought James was making things up. For now, James didn’t much care.

“Can I get to bed now?” he asked, sliding off the couch onto his hands and knees in front of the fire. “I’m sorry I snuck out tonight. It won’t happen again.”

His father’s expression turned serious. “See that it doesn’t. For the time being.”

James pressed his lips together firmly and nodded. Then, suddenly, an idea struck him.

“Wait, Dad, one more thing,” he said, inching closer to the glowing embers. “Tonight, when you were watching me on the Map, did you... see anyone else?”

His father looked up at him curiously, almost warily. “You mean... besides Albus and Ralph and this Nastasia friend of yours?”

“She’s not a friend,” James insisted, dropping his head for a moment. “But yes. Before that.”

There was a long pause. His father studied him, his eyes narrowed slightly. Finally, he said, “There was a flicker. I thought it had to be an error. The Map’s pretty old now, and not as reliable as it once was, back before the battle and a lot of the school had to be rebuilt. There are a few blank areas, and some places that are a bit tetchy...”

“Dad,” James whispered harshly, “just tell me. What did you see?”

Harry shook his head slightly. “It had to just be a glitch, James. It couldn’t have been who the Map said it was.”

James was nearly shaking with impatience now. “Dad!”

“It was Petra, son,” His father said in a low, secretive voice. “Petra Morganstern. But just for a second. She flickered on and off, fluctuating all over the corridor. And then, she was just gone again.”

James simply stared at his father’s face in the glowing red embers, his mouth half open in shock.

“James,” Harry Potter said gravely. “It was a mistake, right? Tell me you didn’t see her tonight. Tell me that somehow... you didn’t see Petra. Did you?”

James barely heard his father. Several seconds of shocked silence passed over him. And then, slowly, he closed his mouth.

“No, Dad,” he answered quietly. “I... didn’t.”

Technically, he hadn’t *seen* anyone.

His father accepted this. He ordered James to lock the cloak away and get immediately into bed. This, James did to the letter.

But, tired as he was, it was a long time before he finally slept.



The last free weekend trickled away beneath a pall of storm clouds and lashing rain, reducing the grounds to marsh. James, like everyone else, spent Sunday afternoon in the common room, cursing the weather and counting the hours until the start of term. Lily joined him after lunch and introduced him to some of her new friends. One of them, James was interested to learn, was a second year named Stanton Ollivander, great-grandson of the famous wand merchant. He was a small, shy, bespectacled boy, reluctant to discuss wands or wand-making, despite (or probably because of) his well-known namesake. This did not prevent him, however, from commenting on James' new wand.

"Lost his old one in the sea," Ollivander explained helpfully to the other first years. "Had it stolen from him, apparently, while he was out swimming or some such."

"Thanks, yes," James said, attempting to curtail the conversation. "It was a bit more than a swim."

"Granddad was a little put out about it, to tell the truth," Ollivander went on, warming to the subject. "Says a wand bonds with a wizard for life and that it's a shame to lose one so soon. Says Potters are usually dead careful with their wands."

James rolled his eyes irritably. "Yeah, well, I'll try not to let this one get nicked by any evil warlocks."

Lance Vassar grinned from further down the table. "Or any haddocks, eh, Potter?"

Unlike James, Lily was in indomitably good spirits, babbling about the start of term and all of her new classes. Her natural exuberance had made her the centre of a small group of fellow first years, most of whom seemed to pay James very little attention at all as they crowded next to him on the hearth sofa.

“So we’ve got Herbology and Transfiguration Monday morning,” Lily proclaimed for the third time, consulting her class schedule. “Neville teaches Herbology. Of course, he’ll be *Professor* Longbottom now. He’s one of the best herbologists in the world. He got invited to the American Wizarding school to give a speech last year.”

“I was there, Lil,” James sighed, but she ignored him, grabbing her new best friend, Chance Jackson, by the arm.

“History of Magic is taught by a ghost!” she exclaimed, bouncing excitedly on the sofa. “Won’t that be interesting? I bet he lived through all *sorts* of adventures before he died, and was just too full of stories to pop off into the afterlife!”

James shook his head, stifling a grin. It was the first time he’d ever heard anyone accuse Professor Binns of being interesting, but he was loathe to ruin his sister’s enthusiasm with the terribly dull truth.

Eventually he extracted himself from the group and looked half-heartedly for someone to play Winkles and Augers with. Rose and Scorpius sat nearby on a pair of opposing armchairs. She was reading, of course, while Scorpius was folding a piece of parchment into a complicated hippogriff shape. Three of the paper sculptures already circled above his chair, chasing each other silently by the watery light of the nearby window. James drew a deep breath, considered walking over and joining them, and then shook his head. Instead, he turned and left the common room, heading nowhere in particular.

That evening, after dinner, he met Ralph and Albus in front of the sign-up parchments.

“So how’s Lily getting along?” Albus asked breezily.

“Like she was born there,” James sighed. “She’s got more perkiness than the rest of us combined. Everybody loves her.”

Albus clucked his tongue. “Pity she didn’t go to Slytherin. We would’ve added a little salt to that sugar. But what are you going to do?”

Ralph fingered a large quill. “Did you talk to Zane on the Shard?”

James shook his head. “No luck. He’s never in his room. We’re just going to have to wing it.”

“There’s hardly anything left,” Ralph replied unhappily, turning back to the parchment. “All the good classes are already filled. Clockwork Mechanics, Magi-American History, Potions, everything. All that’s left is Forbidden Practices and Cursology--”

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“Not a chance,” James interrupted emphatically, approaching the parchment. “I’m not sitting under Professor Remora ever again if I can help it.”

“Mageography,” Ralph went on.

“That’s no better. Unless,” he stopped, raising his eyebrows consideringly. “Is Rose signed up for it? She’s the note-taker. She could make it bearable.”

Ralph shook his head. “No luck.”

“Forget it then,” James grouched. “What else?”

“That’s it,” Albus piped in cheerfully. “You two shouldn’t have waited around for advice from your daft Zombie mate. I signed up straight away, first night. Wizard Home Economics.”

James glanced aside at his brother disbelievingly. “*You* signed up for Wiz Home Ec?”

Albus shrugged. “What can I say? I like old Mother Newt. She’s like a sort of evil version of Grandma Weasley.”

“There are some openings down there,” Ralph pointed as James shook his head. “They aren’t classes, exactly, but clubs and stuff. You think they count?”

“If it’s on the list I guess it counts,” James replied, leaning in and following Ralph’s pointing finger. Under the heading CLUBS AND TEAMS was a list of half a dozen extra-curricular activities. Between *Wizard Chess Aficionados* and *Professor Remora’s Book Club*, James noticed a listing called *Chancellor’s Experimental Communication & Transport*.

“That one!” he brightened, grabbing the quill out of Ralph’s hand.

“Experimental Communication?” Ralph frowned. “Why that one?”

“If I’m right, it’s a Zane thing,” James said, scribbling his name on the appropriate line. “Remember all those crazy ways he kept popping up during our second year? That was him and Chancellor Franklyn and a few others. Some bloke named Rafael, I think. It’s a sort of club where they try out Franklyn’s newest magical inventions.”

“Sounds dodgy,” Ralph hesitated as James gave him back his quill. “You think it’s all safe?”

“Franklyn’s in charge,” James nodded, shrugging vaguely. “So, you know. Probably not. I don’t know. But it’s Zane. Come on, it’ll be fun.”

With a sigh of resignation, Ralph signed his own name to the parchment. “Well, that’s it. I guess we’re all set.”

Albus shook his head and rolled his eyes. “You’re both just as daft as Walker. But if you’re lucky maybe I’ll bring you back a muffin anyway.”



James had no luck reaching Zane via the Shard the next morning, either. The Alma Aleron dormitory, as seen in the chunk of mirror, showed only an empty room, marginally neater than before, and awash with golden mid-day sunbeams via the open window. A fat spider sunned itself on the windowsill, overlooking a corner of the campus and the limbs of a nearby chestnut tree, weighted with leaves and shushing in a light breeze.

Annoyed, James wrapped the Shard again and stuffed it into his trunk. The morning sky outside his own dormitory window was still steely grey and heavy with storm clouds, although the actual rain seemed to have stopped during the night. A stiff wind shook the tower, rattling the window glass and creaking the conical roof far overhead.

“Care of Magical Creatures, first thing,” Graham said with mock enthusiasm, glancing toward the window on his way to a late breakfast. “That should be a treat.”

“At least we get to see Hagrid again,” James commented, following Graham down the stairs.

“Yeah, bully for us,” Graham groaned. “No better way to start your morning than getting stung, burnt or trampled. And wet at the same time? Pinch me, I’m still dreaming.”

James shouldered his knapsack as they stepped through the portrait hole. “I was only gone a year, Graham,” he commented, “I don’t know how I managed to forget what a happy little sunbeam you are.”

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By the time they reached the Great Hall, James barely had time for a quick slice of toast before heading to his first class. Rose angled to join him as they left the castle, striking out across the squelching grounds toward the great stone barn where Hagrid housed his menagerie.

“Are you still angry?” she asked in a small voice.

James didn’t answer immediately. They tramped over the hill overlooking the lake. Stacks of heavy clouds lay upside down on the lake’s surface, reflecting the sky above. Wind ripped across the wet grounds, chasing undulations over the grass.

“I’m not mad,” James admitted grudgingly. “I’m just... disappointed.”

“I really am sorry, James,” Rose insisted, glancing aside at him. “It isn’t that I don’t believe you. I do! It’s just... it’s hard to be caught between the way everyone else sees things and trusting what you say really happened.”

“I don’t see what’s so hard about it,” James said darkly.

Rose’s voice lowered and hardened a bit. “It isn’t just the Lady of the Lake, James. I trusted you. We all did. I know you did your best, and I believe you, but whether you like it or not, you were warned. Not only by Scorpius, but by me, too. I told you it was really dangerous, breaking through the Nexus Curtain. I could’ve told on you, you know. I could have stopped it all, but I didn’t. I let it happen. Because I trusted you.”

“Believe me, Rose,” James said, stopping his cousin as they came into the shadow of the great stone barn. “You couldn’t have changed what happened that night. Even Merlin couldn’t stop it, and I promise you, he really tried. If we hadn’t followed the Lady of the Lake, she and Morgan would have succeeded in killing my dad and Titus. Petra had no choice. There was no stopping what she did.”

“I’m not talking about *that*,” Rose said impatiently, glancing up at James, and then looking away again. “I don’t care about what happened afterwards.”

James blinked at her. “Then what...?”

“Lucy,” Rose said, locking her eyes onto James’ again, unblinking. “I keep thinking that if I had stopped you, Lucy would still be alive. Not just for me, but for Aunt Audrey and Uncle Percy. They worked so hard to adopt her, and they haven’t been the same since they lost her. And poor Molly! Lucy was the only sister she’ll ever have. And I

think, if only I had been there somehow, if only I had done something, maybe I could have saved her. And... and..."

She looked away again, refusing to continue.

"You think it's my fault she died." James said quietly.

Rose's eyes glimmered with sudden tears. She swiped at them.

"I don't *want* to..." she whispered, refusing to look at him. "I keep telling myself... you couldn't have done anything. She was your cousin, too. I... I defend you in my thoughts. But..." she finally looked at him again, and there was something like a defiant plea in her eyes. "It's hard work. I'm sorry, James. I really, really am. I don't want it to be like this."

James suddenly didn't care about the cold wind, or his already soaked shoes, or whether they would be late for their first class. He realized how petty he had been to feel anger toward Rose. A deep sense of emptiness descended on him, weighed him down and drained the colour from the world. He felt that he could just sit down right there on the wet grass and never move again.

"If it helps, Rose," he said in a flat voice, "I don't blame you for thinking that. I feel the same way. I've been thinking about it all summer, replaying it, seeing all the ways that I could have responded differently. I've saved Lucy in my mind... in my dreams... about a million times. But when I wake up..." He shook his head helplessly and spread his hands, framing emptiness.

Rose studied his face intently, tears still standing in her eyes.

Hagrid was approaching, his voice booming over the gusting wind as he led a small group toward the barn. James barely heard them.

"It does help, James," Rose said, nodding once. "Perhaps that makes me a horrible person, but I can't change it. It helps to know you've thought about it, struggled with it." She paused, and then, very quietly, she added, "She fancied you. She knew it was silly, but she couldn't help it. Did you know that?"

James bowed his head weakly.

Rose put her arm through his, supporting him. Together, they rounded the corner of the barn and joined the gathering near its great open doors.

Two summers, he thought to himself, not hearing Hagrid greet the class, not even aware of the small gathering of gawking, unfamiliar faces

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that accompanied him. *Two summers... and two funerals. It's too much. I don't want anymore.*

Dimly, he became aware of what was happening as the newcomers filtered into the class, mingling awkwardly. One of them, a heavy boy with thick ginger hair and a mass of freckles, shouldered in next to James. He caught James' eye and stuck out his hand.

"Morton Comstock," he announced briskly. "Yorke Academy."

James shook the boy's hand automatically. "James," he muttered.

"So this is what they've been telling us about, eh?" Morton nodded, glancing around. "Doesn't seem like all that much of a thing to me. Where are all the monsters and stuff?"

James saw Rose look sidelong at the heavy boy. "They aren't just roaming around free, you know," she answered stiffly. "Most of them aren't exactly tame."

"Despite what our oaf of a teacher thinks," Trenton Bloch muttered pointedly.

James looked back over his shoulder. Trenton stood at the back of the group, alongside Ralph. Ralph shrugged and rolled his eyes.

"Right, then!" Hagrid called happily, clapping his huge, meaty hands. "Into th' barn with yeh. We've got lots ter cover in a short time, what with getting our new friends up ter speed. We'll start with th' Harbinger classes and work through th' Triminaries. If yer lucky," he added with a wink, looking over the students, "We may get a peek at my newest addition, a genuine pimpleback bog slug. Big as a pig if it's an inch!"

"Slugs," Morton scoffed under his breath as the group crowded into the warmth of the barn. "Yeah, this is going to be way scary. 'See amazing creatures of myth and legend' they said. Whatever. I should have stayed home and played Realm of Runescape. At least there the monsters aren't bloody slugs."

"You may want to watch your mouth, Muggle," Trenton Block murmured threateningly. "Here, the spells do more than make pretty lights on a telly screen."

"But you can't use them on us," Morton replied smugly. "We may have signed agreements not to tell anyone else what we see here-- *for the time being*-- but that won't stop the authorities from closing this place down like a bad restaurant if you so much as point one of those little sticks of yours the wrong way. Just try it."

“Oh dear me,” a familiar voice drawled from the rear of the class. James looked back to see Scorpius shaking his head sardonically. “I can tell already that this is going to be a simply *delightful* term.”



It did, in fact, take rather a lot of getting used to.

After Care of Magical Creatures, there were Durmstrangs in Herbology, standing uncomfortably in the stuffy greenhouse, sweating under layers of wool and fur collars.

“What is it with those blokes,” Graham Warton asked behind his hand, “is it *always* winter where they come from?”

“I don’t see any Durmstrang girls,” Fiona Fourcompass noticed a little hopefully. “Is it an all-boys school, do you think?”

Rose scoffed at this. “Of course not. It’s an international wizarding school. They’d have to admit girls.”

“Maybe there’s a separate school for girls,” James suggested reasonably. “Wouldn’t surprise me. They don’t allow Muggle-borns in, after all. Who knows what other rules and restrictions they have?”

“They are *very* serious about their secrecy,” Fiona said archly as they gathered around a raised table covered in purple ferns. “Nobody even knows for sure where the school is. Unless *you* do, Weasley, and just haven’t told anyone.”

“In fact, I know it’s either in Norway or Sweden,” Rose said stiffly. “My mum told me.”

“Maybe that’s just what the Durmstrangs *want* us to think,” Graham said conspiratorially, nudging James with an elbow.

Later, as lunch drew to a close, James, Rose and Ralph watched students leave for their various classes via the four vanishing cabinets. One by one, students would enter a cabinet and then close the door. A moment later, when the door was opened, the cabinet would be spotlessly

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empty. Hanging beneath the rose window, dominating the area above the staff table, the monstrous five-faced Clock ticked off all the relevant time zones, allowing students to keep track of their international class schedules. Rose was nearly jumping with anticipation about her first class abroad, scheduled for just after dinner that night (which would be one-thirty in the afternoon, Alma Aleron time, according to the Clock). Neither Ralph nor James had an international class until Wednesday.

Lily, James saw, stood in line before the Beauxbatons cabinet, surrounded by a happy huddle of other first years. She noticed James looking and waved heartily at him, her strawberry-blonde hair bouncing around her shoulders.

For some reason, James was reminded of Izzy, Petra's younger sister. Lily and Izzy were about the same age, and had become friends during the previous year, when they had attended school together in America. James wondered where Izzy was. With Petra, probably-- they had become virtually inseparable, after all. But where was that? How was Izzy going to grow and learn, living such a chaotic life on the run with her eerily powerful sister? He knew Petra would take care of her as best she could. But was that good enough? Being powerful, James knew, did not necessarily mean being wise.

And of course, there was the matter of the Bloodline-- the last, guttering shred of Lord Voldemort's soul, locked away inside of Petra, tangled inside her like a vine. She had overcome it. James trusted this. But it would never fully go away, never give up trying to twist her, to bend her to its wicked will. The allure of her power was just too great.

James still cared for Petra-- a great deal, in fact-- but he also grudgingly understood why people feared her. Not because she was evil, but because so many dark forces had coalesced around her, seeking to corrupt her, to gain a foothold on her powers. And Petra had, unfortunately, shown that she *could* be manipulated. Judith, The Lady of the Lake, had succeeded in that endeavour, using Petra to virtually destroy the vow of secrecy. By doing so, Petra had shown that she wasn't completely incorruptible.

James sighed deeply to himself as Lily stepped into the Beauxbatons cabinet. She turned, gripped the edge of the open door, and grinned nervously at her friends just outside. A moment later, she pulled the door shut, and was gone.

James shivered in his seat.

After lunch, there were Beauxbatons in Transfiguration. Two girls and two boys in sky blue robes sat clustered at the front table, directly in front of Professor McGonagall, speaking rapid French to each other under their breath as the rest of the class shuffled to their seats. James couldn't shake the feeling that the Beauxbatons were talking unflatteringly about everything they saw as they glanced furtively around the classroom.

"It's just the way they look," Rose scolded him in a harsh whisper. "It's the same expression Aunt Fleur always wears, like she's sort of politely disgusted by everything all the time."

It didn't help that the Beauxbatons were singularly skilled at transfiguration, apparently being taught it from a much younger age. They seemed positively bored by the class assignment of transfiguring a toad into a shoe. After accomplishing this with ease, they began to amuse themselves by adding intermediate transformations, such as tiny alligators (resulting in a rather fetching alligator-skin high-heel), and a fat brown kiwi fruit (on the way to a natty suede loafer).

Rose watched this with annoyance, growing increasingly dissatisfied with her own simple leather pump. Ralph, who had learned to control his own transfigurations very nicely, commented appreciatively.

"Oh, that's good," he nodded seriously. "They added a rattlesnake and made a cowboy boot. Pity the Americans aren't here to see it."

At the front table, the Beauxbatons giggled and sniggered at their creation. Professor McGonagall pursed her lips in obvious irritation.

"Why *aren't* any of the Americans here?" Ashley Doone asked from a nearby table, flicking her wand impatiently.

James paused, his own wand half-raised in front of his toad. "Now that you mention it, we haven't seen more than one additional school per class. Doesn't that seem a little odd?"

"Maybe it's just to keep things simple," Ralph suggested. "After all, each school had its own sign-up parchments. It was probably easiest just to offer each school its own unique set of classes."

"They could have just used a Protean charm to connect all the parchments," James said, shaking his head. "That way every school would see all the sign-ups by all the other schools."

Ashley shrugged. "Well, there has to be a reason why we never see more than one other school per class."

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“Maybe there’s such a thing as *too much* inclusion,” Scorpius said darkly from the table behind James.

James turned in his seat. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?” he asked irritably.

Scorpius shrugged. “Believe what you want, Potter,” he said, fiddling idly with his wand. “But I don’t think any of this is about ‘fostering brotherhood and tolerance between schools’. Call me a cynic.”

“You’re a cynic,” James agreed, turning back around in his seat.

“Oh, now they’re just showing off!” Rose hissed angrily, smacking her own wand onto the table, where it spat a burst of lime green sparks. “Dancing tap shoes made out of jewel crab? That’s not even practical! If they were already so good at Transfiguration they shouldn’t have signed up for the class in the first place!”

James turned away, stifling a grin. Scorpius may be a suspicious, greasy malcontent, but he did seem to be right about one thing: the addition of other schools in class certainly didn’t seem to be fostering any brotherhood and tolerance.



Tuesday’s class schedule illustrated just how quickly the drudgery of school work could replace the excitement of returning to a familiar, even beloved, place.

Potions classes were still held in the dungeons and taught by the head of Slytherin house, Professor Lucia Heretofore, who, in keeping with longstanding tradition, had no love for students outside her own house. Unlike her more infamous forerunner, Severus Snape, however, Professor Heretofore had no secret ambition of teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts or any other class. Her ambitions, it seemed, were confined to the more tangible goals of tormenting non-Slytherins. To that end, Professor

Heretofore's first class assignment was the mixing of a particularly difficult elixir designed to temporarily grant supernatural hearing abilities.

"Mix it properly," she promised, arching one pencil-thin black eyebrow, "and you will listen to the rats plan their secret counsels in the highest rafters of the north tower. Mix it *improperly*," she warned, cocking her head and ticking an index finger back and forth, "and your ears will swell to the size of teakettles." She smiled meanly, her black eyes sparkling. "There is no antidote. So. Do be careful."

The four Muggle exchange students from Yorke school were, of course, exempted from the exercise. Professor Heretofore, showing apparently monumental restraint, instructed them to merely sit in the front corner and observe.

"Should we take notes, Professor?" asked an eager, pretty girl with braids and a silvery mouthful of braces.

"If it so moves you," Heretofore answered with thinly veiled disgust. "I suppose even pets may learn to act like their masters if they watch them hard enough."

Fortunately, the improperly prepared elixir's negative effects only lasted until half-way through the next class, which happened to be History of Magic. The ghostly Professor Binns, of course, barely noticed the arrival of the students, much less the grotesquely enlarged ears on many of them.

"I miss Professor Baruti already," James grouched, holding his ears back so that they didn't flop forward and smack him in the face. "Nobody ever got accidentally cursed in *his* class. Besides, everybody knows that Heretofore helps the Slytherins more than any of us. None of them ever gets a potion wrong."

"Kevin Murdoch's got ginormous ears, just like you," Rose pointed out primly, producing a sheaf of history notes. Her own ears, of course, appeared perfectly normal. "And *he's* a Slytherin."

"Professor Heretofore doesn't help *me* any," Ralph agreed. "And I do all right."

James shook his head, nearly dislodging his massive ears again. "That just proves that Murdoch is a hopeless berk and you're a natch at potions. I tell you, she's giving the rest of your Slytherin mates an unfair advantage. I hear she even helps you lot with all the essays and homework she assigns, at nights down in the dungeon. Try to tell me *that's* not true."

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Ralph shrugged and made a show of arranging his own quill and ink. “She offers tutoring sessions for anyone who needs a little help. Nothing wrong with that.”

“There is if it’s only available to Slytherins,” James whispered darkly, “*and* if by ‘tutoring’ you mean ‘giving out all the answers’.”

“Move your monstrous ears, James,” Graham whispered in annoyance. “I can’t see the front of the classroom.”

James glanced over his shoulder. “Who cares? It’s not like you’re going to take any notes from that mess on the blackboard.”

“It’s not the blackboard I want to see,” Graham muttered dreamily.

James followed Graham’s gaze. A pair of golden-haired Beauxbatons girls sat in the front of the room, studiously listening to Professor Binns’ lecture. A brilliant sunbeam from the single window lay across their shoulders and hair, making both girls virtually glow in the gloomy classroom.

“They arrived early just to arrange those seats,” Ashley Doone muttered with a roll of her eyes. “They’re not Veelas. They’re drama queens.”

Graham smiled wistfully and settled his chin onto his hands. “They can be any kind of queens they want, s’far as I’m concerned.”

“Shh!” Rose hissed, shaking her head in annoyance. “I can barely hear Binns’ lecture over the arguments of the rats in the north tower. And everybody’s bloody heartbeats. And who knew spider web-making was so noisy, what with all those little clicking legs?”

James rolled his eyes, lowered his head, and allowed his ears to flop forward with twin, meaty smacks.

At lunchtime, he found himself seated across from Lance Vassar, the fifth year who had previously transferred from the wealthy private school called Bragdon Wand. Tall, good looking, and emanating a sort of worldly-wise confidence, Lance tended to dominate any conversation around him. He had a sort of magnetism that was hard to deny. Indeed, despite Lance’s sharp words in the common room during first night, James found himself grudgingly longing for the popular boy’s approval and acceptance.

“I took a private class at Durmstrang when I was twelve,” Lance said off-handedly, in reference to the students queuing up before the international vanishing cabinets. “A very good program regarding the

dark arts, really. They teach some defence, but they also teach a lot of the actual curses and jinxes. Even some of the unforgiveable ones. You have to understand them to know how to fight them, you know.”

Penelope Bones, a second year girl with dark brown curls, asked in a low voice, “*You* know the unforgiveable curses?”

Lance gave a half shrug. “There are places in the world where it’s important to know how to defend yourself at a moment’s notice. Last year, my parents and I spent the winter in the German Black Forest. There are still tribes of giants there that have never seen a human being.”

“What were you doing there?” James asked, frowning.

“Mother studies giant languages,” Lance replied. “She’s writing a book on it. Father and I spent most of our time at camp in one of the more civilized tribes. Giants can actually be quite entertaining if you know some of the language.”

“We went to a giant’s wedding last year,” James announced. “Right here in the Forbidden Forest. The giant king was there and everything.”

Lance seemed slightly impressed. “The giant king, eh? Of course, you know the giants have almost as many kings as they have tribes. Still, a giant’s wedding is a pretty secret event. Mother’s only seen a few, and those were from some distance away. They can be pretty dangerous affairs for humans who get underfoot.”

“I remember,” James nodded fervently. “We spent most of the time huddled up in the trees, just trying to stay out of the way.”

Leaving the Great Hall some time later, James felt rather pleased to have gotten into Lance’s circle. The boy was actually quite interesting and knowledgeable, despite his obvious arrogance. Ralph, however, disliked him intensely.

“He’s the worst kind,” he said under his breath, showing an unusual level of venom. “The kind who will butter your bread with honey on one side and poison on the other.”

“You’re confused,” Graham said. “That’s Slytherins you’re thinking of. Lance is a Gryffindor. It’s your lot who are usually the backstabbers and traitors, not us.”

“That just makes us experts on the subject,” Trenton Bloch said, coming alongside Ralph. “We know a lout when we see one.”

“Slytherins are motivated by ambition,” Ralph growled. “But there are plenty of other reasons for a person to lie and use others.

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Sometimes the ones with the most seemingly noble intentions are the worst of the lot. They think anything is all right if it's 'for the cause'.

"Oh, Lance is just a little spoiled," Rose said quietly, glancing back to make sure no one overheard them as they made their way to the Ancient Runes classroom. "He's all right, really. He can't help being a bit stuck up. It's the way he was raised."

"His parents are Muggle rights activists," Graham added pointedly. "They've both written loads of books and studied all over the world. His father was once a teacher at Bragdon Wand, back before Lance was born."

"So why's he here, then?" Ralph asked tersely. "Why's he slumming it with the likes of us? Are we all just some pet project, like the giants are to his mother?"

"Ralph!" Rose exclaimed. "That's a terrible thing to say!"

Ralph's face reddened but he didn't back down. "I just don't like him. He's a fraud."

"You just think all rich wizarding families have to be Slytherins," Graham said as they reached the classroom. "Not all rich families are pure-blood, Muggle-hating and evil."

"Who's Muggle-hating and evil," a voice piped up next to James. "I thought old Tabs Corsica graduated or went to Azkaban or something. Either way, she's gone, right?"

James glanced aside and a grin broke out on his face. "Zane! What are you doing here?"

"Ancient Runes," Zane shrugged, matching James' smile. "Same as you. It was either this or flying class, and I'd hate to make you all look worse on a broom than you already are."

"It's good to see you, mate," Ralph said seriously, clapping Zane on the back.

"Sheesh, Ralph," Zane said, rubbing his shoulder and looking up at Ralph's dour expression. "What's the deal with you? You look like somebody else ate the last cupcake."

Rose shouldered past the boys and plopped into a seat. "It's been a weird couple of days," she said, pulling her Ancient Runes textbook out of her bag and thumping it unceremoniously onto the table. "All this brotherhood and tolerance is getting under everybody's skin."

Most of the class looked up as the new Ancient Runes professor entered the classroom, sweeping briskly up the aisle. He was fat and

uniformly bedraggled, with miss-matched patches on his ill-fitting robes, a crooked mortar board cap wobbling on his head, and a brambly, yellowing beard. His eyes were very large and sharp behind his tiny spectacles as he reached the desk and turned, surveying the class intently.

“Ancient Runes,” he said in a high, clipped voice, “is *not* a history class. Runes are alive with power, vibrating with portents, pulsing with purpose. The sooner you understand that simple truth, the better we shall all get along.” He paused for a moment to hoist and drop an enormous carpet bag onto his desk. The bag was decked with all manner of badges, buttons, and banners. The largest badge bore flashing yellow words on a red background: MUGGLES ARE PEOPLE TOO.

“Well?” the professor demanded suddenly. “Why aren’t you all writing that down?”

There was a sudden shuffling around the room as heads bent over parchments and quills began to skritch and bob.

“I am called,” the professor proclaimed stridently, “Professor Voltaire Votary. Magical runes, glyphs and logograms are my life’s passion, and I will appreciate your taking them precisely as seriously as I do. Why, you may ask? You!” Here Votary pointed at Hufflepuff Kendra Korner, seated in the front row. “You wonder why this must be, yes?”

Kendra leaned back in her seat, away from the pointing finger. “I--”

“Because we live in unforgiving times, pupils,” Votary interrupted zealously. “Times that will demand much of us, times that will determine whether we, as witches and wizards, will rise to the challenges before us and launch into a new era of enlightenment, or fall back into our old prejudices, failing to meet our destinies, as so many would have us do.” As the professor spoke, he unclasped his carpet bag, reached inside, and produced a pile of huge, dusty books, several magnifying glasses, a telescoping wand, and a fully decked silver tea tray, its kettle steaming gently. He settled the tray onto the desk with a small clatter and began to pour himself a cup.

Zane leaned close to James and whispered, “This guy’s a bit like Trelawney on a bad day after a few Firewhiskys,”

“Professor Trelawney, young man?” Votary wheeled around, his huge eyes sweeping toward Zane. “The teacher of Divination, yes? This is what you liken me to?”

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Zane's eyes bulged slightly in surprise. James knew that Zane was rather unaccustomed to being caught at anything.

"You're one of the Americans," Votary sighed, deflating a bit. "I was told you would be attending. Very well. I know you are with us in spirit, even if your disciplines leave much to be desired. But no. Divination will not help us in the coming days. What will help us is cunning, insight, and fearlessness to lay bare the deceptions of those who cling to the tired past. In this, the wisdom of the ancient runes may help us. I will teach you. If, that is, you prove teachable."

As the class wore on, Professor Votary divided his time between intensely dry lectures about the subtleties of ancient pictograms and surprisingly exciting tales of his years spent studying archaic scripts in some of the most dangerously cursed places on earth. Unfortunately, both the class and Professor Votary were regularly frustrated by the disparity of interest between the two.

"A question, young man?" Votary said, interrupting himself and nodding toward Kevin Murdoch's urgently raised hand.

"How many mummies did you say were chasing you?"

Votary frowned and adjusted his spectacles. "I don't believe I did say. It isn't exactly important. The typical Pharaoh retinue was about six personal guards, ten servants, and forty foot soldiers. I *did* mention, however, that traditional mummies are notoriously slow. They were well behind us, on the other side of the spear traps and viper pit and such. Much more interestingly, of course, were the inscriptions on the sarcophagus, which were--"

"How many of your team did you lose in the viper pit?" Ashley Doone asked breathlessly, not waiting to be called upon.

"Well, none, technically," Votary replied, blinking rapidly. "They merely used a standard sleeping spell to quiet the snakes until they could climb out. Anyway, as I was saying, the inscription was written in a very curious combination of Middle Bronze Age left-to-right hieroglyphs and Demotic pictograms, which, as you may imagine, caused us *quite* a conundrum. In fact, there's a very amusing anecdote wherein my colleague, Doctor Mumbutu, mistakenly assigned the spatial preposition 'without' to what was actually a Meroitic number seven, and you can simply imagine the endlessly diverting mistranslations that were the result--"

“What about the curse of the scarabs?” Trenton interjected impatiently. “They were eating away at the golden door already! Did any of them make it through?”

“Well of course they did,” Votary replied irritably. “They were a cloud of metal-eating bronze beetles after all. They burrowed a hole through the centre of the vault door but could only come through one at a time, of course. My assistant merely melted them with his wand as they burst through. The *truly* interesting thing, though, is that the sarcophagus incantation was *purposely cross-coded* with the language of two separate dynasties in order to confound any grave robbers foolish enough to--”

Zane jabbed a hand into the air. “When you got out, did the golden sphinx eat you and your crew or had you figured out its riddle by then?”

“Really, young man,” Votary exclaimed, losing his patience. “Think about the stupidity of your question. *Of course* we figured out the riddle. The answer was carved right there on the chamber wall in ancient graffiti, along with a variety of anatomically impossible Egyptian limericks. Really, I do think you are all *quite* missing the point...”

This went on for twenty more minutes until the end of class. Frustrated and annoyed, Votary assigned a rather shocking amount of reading homework and proceeded to dump his tea tray directly into his carpet bag.

“This might actually be sort of fun if we can keep him off point,” Zane commented as they funnelled toward the door. “What do you lot have next?”

“Study period,” James replied. “Good thing, too, with that much reading to do.”

Zane shook his head and clucked his tongue. “Studying during study period,” he said mournfully. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“What about you?” Ralph asked as they emerged into the darkening corridor. “Dinner is in an hour. Will you still be here?”

Zane laughed. “It’s not even lunchtime in my world. But I’m not heading home just yet. We’ve got one more class here at Hoggies. Advanced Charms with good old Flitwick. It’ll be good to see that old hinkypunk again.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Rose asked, stopping to look curiously back at Zane.

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As if in answer, a girl wove toward them through the dispersing throng, a huge hot pink backpack slung over one shoulder. She spied Zane and approached him.

Both Ralph and James saw her at the same time. Ralph shot a look at James, stifling a wry grin. Rose frowned at the girl's purple hair, matching mascara and glittering nose ring.

"This is Nastasia," Zane announced, threading an arm through the girl's as she joined them. She smiled ironically and surveyed the group, her gaze finally stopping on James. Zane went on obliviously, "She's from Pixie house, if you couldn't tell. I met her at a pep rally for the upcoming inaugural Clutchcudgel match between the Pixies and the Zombies. Of course, we were there for very different reasons, what with her side cheering and our side... well, not so much jeering as sneaking into Aphrodite Heights with a generous stock of week-old cafeteria jambalaya. Nastasia, this is the crew I told you about. This is Rose Weasley. Those mokes lurking against the wall back there are Scorpius Malfoy and Graham Warton. And these two--"

"Oh, there's no need for introductions in their case," Nastasia spoke up, still studying James with a strangely disconcerting smile. "*We've...* already met."



Zane was obviously quite taken by the enigmatic Nastasia. James saw them once more that evening as they made their way back to the Alma Aleron vanishing cabinet. Zane was leading Nastasia by the hand, pointing enthusiastically at the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall, no doubt chattering away about his year as a Ravenclaw. Nastasia allowed herself to be pulled along, an expression of patient boredom on her face. She spied James at the Gryffindor table and locked onto him with her oddly intent gaze. James frowned.

I thought you weren't going to take any classes here, he mused at her with a shake of his head.

I changed my mind, her expression seemed to say, as if she had read his thoughts. *It's my prerogative. And I think you're glad I did...*

James shook his head again, breaking eye contact with her. He glanced at Zane instead, who saw him and waved.

"Tomorrow at Durmstrang!" he called across the crowded hall, pointing at the enormous Clock over the head table.

James nodded vaguely. Tomorrow was indeed his first international class-- Practical Prophecy at Durmstrang-- but how did Zane know about that?

"Quidditch try-outs next Thursday," Devindar Das announced, plopping into a seat further down the table. "You planning on showing up this year, James?"

James nodded enthusiastically. "I'll be there."

"We've been discussing your last year in America," Devindar said, grabbing a dinner roll in each hand. "Clutchcudgel is a very different thing from Quidditch, you know."

Graham grinned and jabbed James with an elbow. "You're not going to try to stand up on your broom, are you?"

"Ha-ha," James said. "You just wait and see."

"Actually, it could be quite difficult to adjust," said Aloysius Arnst, a greasy-faced seventh year boy seated across from Devindar. He adjusted his heavy spectacles fussily. "What with muscle memory and all. Your whole body is going to insist you're piloting a skim instead of mounted on a broom."

Deirdre Finnegan frowned at Aloysius. "What's *muscle memory*?"

Aloysius scoffed and leaned forward, obviously glad someone had asked. "It's *only* the thing that lets you walk and use a wand at the same time. Your brain delegates most repetitive physical actions to your muscles so you don't have to think about doing them all the time. Your body learns how to do them and your brain forgets about it. *That's* muscle memory, and it's a hard thing to control."

"All right, already," Deirdre said, rolling her eyes. "Sorry I asked."

Devindar shook his head at Aloysius. "If James says he's up for it, he's up for it. But it *is* going to be a packed squad this year," he added,

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turning back to James. “All of last year’s players are coming back except for Gretchen Thomas. You up for playing Beater?”

“James can play *any* position, I bet,” Cameron called from James’ other side. “You watch! He’ll be totally excellent!”

James smiled at the boy’s enthusiasm. For once, he appreciated it. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Cam. I guess we’ll all see next Thursday, eh?”

Cameron nodded eagerly and gave James a hearty thumbs-up.

After dinner, Ralph found James in the entrance hall.

“Zane’s joining us at Durmstrang tomorrow,” he announced happily. “He’s signed up for Practical Prophecy, too.”

James greeted this enthusiastically, and then narrowed his eyes. “Is his purple-haired girlfriend coming along with him?”

“Nastasia?” Ralph blinked, “I don’t think so. Is she really his girlfriend, do you think?”

James shrugged. “Who can tell? We’ll ask him tomorrow. Either way, things are looking up.”

“Should be fun,” Ralph agreed. “You want to come down to the dungeon and study with me and Albus? You could get some pointers from Professor Heretofore about that supersonic hearing potion.”

“I’m not that desperate yet,” James sighed with some reluctance. “But perhaps next time. See you tomorrow, Ralph.”

For the first time during James’ school career, he was determined to stay on top of his homework rather than let it pile up around him as the weeks progressed. That evening, he established himself at a well-lit corner table in the common room and spread out his textbooks, ink and parchments.

“Well look at you,” Rose said appreciatively, joining him. “This isn’t like you at all, being all studious and such.”

“Maybe it’s totally like me and I just haven’t had a chance to show it,” James commented, flipping pages in his Ancient Runes textbook. “Maybe I’ve always been too distracted by all the other annoying things that always seem to be happening around me.”

“Maybe,” Rose shrugged. “Or maybe you’re just a naturally lazy student fighting a losing battle. We’ll see if you’re still here in a week.”

“Shouldn’t you be encouraging me instead of taking wagers on how soon I’ll throw in the towel?”

“Once more you’ve confused me with my mum,” Rose sniffed, plunking her Arithmancy textbook onto the table and pulling out a chair. “A galleon says you’re hopelessly behind by the time Professor Revalvier assigns the first Wiz-lit essay.”

“I want in on that action,” Scorpius commented, joining Rose at the table.

Lily jumped up from a nearby armchair with a grin. “Double or nothing he’ll be asking to crib your notes by Halloween, Rosie.”

“You’re all *very* encouraging,” James groaned, making a show of arranging his parchment and ink.

The truth of the matter was that he didn’t much feel like studying. Instead, he spent an inordinate amount of time straightening his parchments, signing his name to the inside covers of his new textbooks, turning to the proper pages, loading his quill, laying out his wand, adjusting the position of his chair, and generally not accomplishing anything meaningful.

Meanwhile, across the table, Scorpius had put on his glasses and somehow managed to adopt a coolly lazy pose while reading his Herbology textbook. He tapped his quill idly on the table. James stared at this and listened to the tiny *tap-tap-tap*.

With his own Ancient Runes textbook propped open before him, he found himself thinking of Nastasia. There was something irritatingly unsettling about her. What did Zane see in her? Anyone could see straight away that she was troublesome and infuriating. It was all wrapped up in her mad coloured hair, and the secretive half-smile she always seemed to be wearing, and the impish little glint in her heavily-made-up eyes, and even the glitter of that insufferable diamond nose stud. James glanced down finally at his textbook and was annoyed to see he had doodled her name onto the corner of the page. He scribbled it out with an annoyed grunt.

“Who’s Nastasia Hendricks then?” Lily prodded meaningfully, leaning over to peer at her brother’s textbook as he obliterated the name.

“Nobody,” he grouched. “Some mad American girl that Zane’s taken up with.”

Lily cocked her head. “Jealous, are we?”

James blinked at her in horror. “What? No! She’s just... daft. And she’s trouble somehow. I just know it.”

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Across the table, Rose nodded. “He’s jealous,” she agreed, meeting Lily’s eyes.

James shook his head with disgust. “She’s tricky and obnoxious,” he insisted, lowering his voice emphatically. “Ask Ralph. We caught her sneaking around here on first night, before any of the school vanishing cabinets were supposed to allow anyone through.”

Rose gave James a sceptical look. “She obviously had permission, then.”

“No way,” James insisted. “She was up to no good. And when she was done, she just popped right inside the Alma Aleron cabinet and vanished away.”

Lily shook her head dismissively. “Well that’s silly. The headmaster said the cabinets wouldn’t allow any students through until first day of class. It was a basic security spell and totally fool-proof.”

“I know what I saw,” James said. “Like I said, you can ask Ralph. Albus, too. We all saw her.”

Scorpius, James realized, was observing the conversation with narrowed eyes. “If she was here, Potter, then she was supposed to be. The spell is very specific. No person could pass through the cabinets until the proper time.”

“No *person*,” James repeated, pointing a finger meaningfully at Scorpius. “But what if she’s not human? What if she’s, like, a vampire or something? They have vampires at Alma Aleron, you know. One of them was a mate of mine last year-- Wentworth was his name. Not the most obvious vampire-looking bloke in the world, but still.”

Scorpius leaned back in his chair again, vaguely disappointed. “Ignoring the unlikelihood of that idea, you forget that vampires are, in fact, still human.”

“So?” James plowed on. “Maybe she’s an animagus or something! Maybe she changed into some animal when she was inside the cabinet, triggering the magic because she wasn’t actually a human anymore!”

“Nice try, James,” Rose said, nodding speculatively, tapping her chin with the feather of her quill. “Or maybe she’s a ghost. Or a boggart! They like cabinets, after all.”

“Oh, now you’re just being stupid,” James rolled his eyes and shut his textbook. “She’s trouble, that’s all I know. I should have taken Ralph up on his invite to go study with the Slytherins.”

“Let me know if you do,” Scorpius said lazily, closing his own textbook. “I may come with.”

He stood, gathered his things, and turned to leave. James watched him cross the common room and disappear up the stairs.

“For what it’s worth,” Lily whispered, leaning close. “I believe you, big brother. If you think she’s trouble, then perhaps she is. Either that, or you really do fancy her.” She bit her lips, stifling a giggle.

James nodded and rolled his eyes. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, little sister.” He gathered his own things, scooping them haphazardly into his knapsack and pushing away from the table. A minute later, he followed Scorpius up to the fourth years’ dormitory.

The tower room was dark and quiet, with only a few candles lit. Joseph Torrance lay sprawled on his four-poster in his clothes, wand in hand, his head resting on an open transfiguration textbook. James changed into his pyjamas and brushed his teeth in the little dormitory bathroom.

Tomorrow was his first international class at Durmstrang. That, James was quite sure, would prove interesting, especially with Ralph and Zane along for the ride. Thinking that-- and trying not to dwell on the obnoxious Nastasia Hendricks-- he threw himself onto his bed, propped his chin on his hands, and stared at the moon through the tall mullioned window. The window was unlocked and slightly open, allowing the freshness of the September evening to sift in, lightly lifting the curtains.

Tiredness began to weigh down James’ eyelids. He rolled over, kicked back his covers, and stared up at the ceiling.

A moment later, he frowned and sat up in bed. He glanced around, squinting, then fumbled for his dreaded glasses on the bedside table. Putting them on, he glanced around the darkened room again, suddenly suspicious.

Scorpius’ bed was empty. His books lay dumped onto it, but there was no sign of the boy himself.

“That little twonk!” James whispered to himself. “Where’s he off to?”

It wasn’t the first time Scorpius had been mysteriously missing from his bed. It had happened several times during James’ second year.

“What are you up to, you greasy git?” James muttered to himself, narrowing his eyes. He determined to wait up for the boy to return, and then to confront him and demand an explanation.

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He scooted back and leaned against the headboard of his bed, crossing his arms and staring purposefully toward Scorpius' empty bed. After a few minutes, however, his eyes began to droop. His previous late nights were catching up to him. He forced them open, only to feel them growing heavy again a minute later.

He decided it would be safe to simply rest his eyes a bit. He could still listen. He would hear anyone coming. Perhaps he would even recruit Graham's help when he came up to the dormitory. That was probably the best plan. They could help keep each other awake.

James sat and listened, eyes closed.

Four minutes later, he was asleep. Next to him, the curtains lifted on a breath of breeze from the slightly open window. Somewhere far off, an owl hooted in the darkness.





3. A FAMILIAR FACE

Late the next morning, James and Ralph ran through the Great Hall, dodging between students, just as the enormous clock over the head table struck ten. Its deep gong filled the hall and bounced from the high windows.

“Curse Revalvier and her stupid wizlit class all the way on the other side of the castle,” James panted, angling toward the Durmstrang vanishing cabinet.

Ralph puffed, red-cheeked and sweating, behind James. “It’s not her that made us late,” he wheezed, “it’s her fan club. And yours, too, apparently.”

James scowled in embarrassment.

Some years ago, Professor Revalvier had, of course, written a series of fictionalized books about the adventures of Harry Potter. These books had been published in the Muggle world under a different name, becoming immensely popular. Somehow, the Muggle students from Yorke Academy had learned that Revalvier was the actual author, and had

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signed up in droves for her Wizard Literature class. After class, the throng of admirers gathering for her autograph had merely been a nuisance, blocking the library exit, until Graham had loudly pointed out that James was the son of the famous Harry Potter himself.

The result had been rather disconcerting. James had never experienced such a swarm of attention and questions. He had not entirely disliked it, even if it did seem rather silly and unwarranted. Still, it had been a difficult crowd to detach himself from, leaving him and Ralph less than five minutes to dash across the castle.

The Durmstrang cabinet door clapped shut on the last student just as James and Ralph skidded to a halt in front of it. A bright green flash lit the cracks around the door frame and the cabinet shuddered, as if a weight inside had suddenly popped out of existence.

James gulped and reached hesitantly for the door handle.

“We’d better go together,” Ralph suggested, “The Durmstrang professors don’t like tardiness, and I hear they’re always looking to make examples straight away.”

James nodded. He pulled the heavy door open, revealing a blank wooden interior. It seemed too dark inside, as if the green lacquered wood absorbed light rather than reflecting it. It still contained an eerie mossy smell, like dead seaweed on a stony beach. The two boys shouldered inside together and turned to face the light and noise of the Great Hall. No one was watching from outside-- the vanishing cabinets had already become mundane. James saw Willow Wisteria and Devindar Das walking toward the rear doors, deep in conversation, having just returned from classes at Beauxbatons. Ralph shouldered his bag and reached for the open door, but it swung shut of its own accord, slamming with a loud clunk and blocking out all light.

A split second later there was a blinding green flash and the floor dropped out of the cabinet. James’ stomach leapt up into his throat as his feet fell into nothing. Violent black wind roared up around him, flinging his robes all around and buffeting his hair. And then, just as quickly as it had dropped away, the floor slammed up beneath their feet again, propelling them up and out. The cabinet door burst open and both boys rocketed out into cold whiteness.

James fell atop Ralph, saving himself from tumbling onto an expanse of rough stone cobbles. Ralph, of course, was less fortunate.

“Owf!” he exclaimed, his voice muffled against the frosty stones. He rolled over, throwing James off. “That’s the second time you’ve used me for a bloody floor mat!”

James scrambled to sit up and found himself staring up at dozen people, all of whom had turned to look back at him.

“*And* there’s James and Ralph,” Ravenclaw Ashley Doone muttered, rolling her eyes.

“Hey guys,” Trenton Bloch called with a grin, “Have a nice fall?” He chuckled at his wit.

Among the group were a few other Hogwarts students, some rather disgusted looking Beauxbatons girls, and, to James’ small relief, Zane, decked in a long woollen coat and a yellow and black stocking cap. He seemed, somewhat unsuccessfully, to be restraining a burst of laughter.

A tall, forbidding figure stepped around the line of students. Obviously an older Durmstrang student in characteristic furs and cap, he regarded James and Ralph for a moment, his dark eyes and block-like jaw inscrutable.

“I zee ve haf latecomers,” he said calmly. “Haffing missed ze orientation, zey vere unprepared for ze difference in altitude. A helpful demonstration of how not to travel by cabinet, yes?”

“The trick is to jump just as the doors close,” Ashley whispered helpfully, hopping once in demonstration.

James and Ralph clambered quickly to their feet, red-faced both with embarrassment and cold. As they joined the line of students, James took in their surroundings for the first time. They seemed to be standing atop a high, narrow rampart, lined with low, crenelated walls and leading to a stark, square tower. Grains of snow skirled in the air, scouring the cobbled walkways and forming small drifts against the walls. The wind was hard and bitter, blowing through a ring of nearby mountain peaks whose sharp pinnacles stabbed at a steely sky.

“Follow me, please,” The Durmstrang escort said, turning swiftly on his boot heel so that his long furs swayed. He stalked toward the squat, square tower. Haltingly, the gathered students hurried to follow.

“Hey fellas,” Zane muttered from the corner of his mouth. “Way to make an entrance.”

James huddled against the wind and struggled to keep his teeth from chattering. “What’d we miss?”

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“That there’s Volkiev,” Zane nodded toward their escort. “He’s their version of a prefect and he’s our guide while we’re here, meaning that if we wander off anywhere without him, we’ll probably end up hanging by our thumbs somewhere.”

“Where are we?” Ralph asked in a low whisper. “What mountains are these?”

“Beats me,” Zane replied, “and I expect that’s for the best. Something tells me that asking too many questions around here isn’t exactly healthy. This place is more cloak-and-dagger than that joint in Knockturn Alley that just sells cloaks and daggers.”

“Oooh,” Ashley cooed, glancing back over her shoulder, “The Elegant Assassin? I love that place! My uncle took me there, once. My mum had a whole litter of nargles about it, but it was worth it.”

One of the Beauxbatons girls shushed them harshly as they neared the entrance to the tower.

Volkiev didn’t pause at the heavy wooden door but simply raised his wand in one black-gloved hand. The door swung swiftly open, revealing a low, torch-lit stairway. Volkiev marched through and turned to descend the stone stairs.

“Durmstrang Academy welcomes its visitors,” he called, his voice echoing up the throat of the tower. “Please, if you will stay behind me, you will avoid becoming lost in the school’s many halls and corridors. For your, ahh, *zafety*, it would not be wise to lose your way.”

Volkiev led the troop down many flights of stone steps, then through an arched doorway into a long corridor. His pace was swift and unbroken, causing the students to occasionally trot to keep up. James looked around curiously, but there was very little to see. The doors along the corridor were tall and arched, but all firmly closed, lit only with crackling torches. Volkiev’s marching boots clacked on the flagstone floor, echoing loudly.

They turned right at an intersection, marched another hundred yards, and then turned left again. They passed through a second large, unmarked doorway, this one guarded by a pair of very intimidating suits of red armour, their squared helmets watching blindly, their gauntlets resting on the hilts of enormous, glittering swords.

“Nothing to see, folks,” Zane muttered, “Move along, move along.”

James shook his head. "It's like he's purposely taking us the long and boring way, so we either don't see anything they don't want us to see, or can't get out on our own."

Zane sniffed thoughtfully. "Next time bring some bread crumbs, Hansel,"

Ralph sidled between them. "So what's going on back at the Aleron?" he asked under his breath. "How's everybody adjusting to life after the Night of the Unveiling?"

"Too much to tell," Zane answered with uncharacteristic seriousness. "Short answer, all the wrong people are as pleased as punch. Ask me more later and I'll tell you what I can."

James glanced around Ralph's shoulder. "Speaking of the wrong people, what's the deal with that Nastasia girl?"

Zane grinned. "She's great isn't she? I can't believe she's a Pixie. That girl's got Zombie written all over her if you ask me."

"So are you two, like..." James persisted, shaking his head vaguely. "Together, or something?"

"Dunno. Maybe. I did already ask her to the Halloween dance," Zane shrugged. "I was thinking of doing something different this year. What do you think of this:" he held his hands up, framing an invisible scene, "Star Wars Meets Classical Horror-- 'the Phantom Menace of the Opera'! I'll be the singing ghost alien, Nastasia can be the prodigy queen chorus girl. Eh? Eh?" He wagged his eyebrows meaningfully.

"That's idiotic," Ashley volunteered.

"I kind of like it," Ralph admitted.

"You're both daft," James muttered. "The point is, Nastasia is trouble. You know that, right?"

Zane sighed happily. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

James rolled his eyes as Volkiev led the troop through one more doorway into a much larger and brighter corridor. Here, finally, Durmstrang students could be seen walking to their classes or gathered in small knots beneath monstrous iron chandeliers. High tapestries lined the walls showing larger-than-life wizards with extremely impressive beards and moustaches, their dark eyes staring down above rich layers of velvet and fur. The vaulted ceilings were dim in the high distance, full of flitting, shadowy movement and distant chitters.

"Bats," Ashley shuddered. "I hate bats."

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“They’re all boys,” Ralph muttered as they followed Volkiev through the crowded corridor.

Ashley craned her neck nervously, peering up at the distant ceiling. “How can you tell from here?”

“Not the bats,” Ralph whispered, nudging James and nodding toward the Durmstrang students. “Everybody else.”

James glanced around as the Durmstrangs swept past, each one eyeing the newcomers with stony curiosity or open suspicion. All of them were indeed boys, each one dressed in matching slate grey uniforms with high collars and fur-lined capes, all of them eerily quiet in the huge, echoing corridor. Even the younger ones seemed somehow large and intimidating. Some had dark hair and depthless black eyes. Others were white-blonde with eyes of cold blue or vivid green.

“No girls,” Ralph confirmed quietly. “And no... er... *Weasleys*.”

Volkiev suddenly turned to the right, using both hands to push open a pair of enormously tall doors. Sunlight flooded the corridor from the room beyond, making James squint as he turned to enter. When his eyes adjusted to the sight before him, he stopped for a moment, his mouth dropping open in surprise.

The drab, narrow corridors he had seen so far could not have prepared him for the sheer scope and wonder of this room. The floor was marble tile, shaped in a huge half-circle, reflecting a vaulted dome of iron-framed windows that formed the far wall. Each glass pane was etched with frost around its edges, making a hazy lace of black iron and white ice against the sprawling mountain vista beyond. Positioned below the wall of windows, looking tiny and dark by comparison, was a wooden block of a desk with one ornate, high-back chair pushed against its middle.

“Whoa,” Zane breathed, stepping further into the room and turning, raising his eyes. James followed his gaze. A twin pair of wrought iron stairs spiralled up on either side of the doorway, leading to curving balconies on either side of the room. Each balcony was loaded with a freight of objects. On the left side, James recognized a collection of enormously oversized instruments of divination: a desk-sized crystal ball on a complicated golden stand; an ancient mirror with tarnished, cloudy edges, embedded in a baroque gilt frame; a stone bowl the size of a millstone that could only be an enormous pensieve, and other strange, monolithic artefacts and devices of obviously ancient origin.

The right balcony, however, was freighted with what seemed to be plants. Each was massive, alien-looking, and embedded in its own enormous ceramic pot, some with roots and vines bubbling over onto the grated floor below. Eerily overgrown flowers, leaves and vines bobbed subtly, nodding to the students as they filed toward a row of tables in the centre of the floor below.

“It’s a greenhouse,” Trenton Bloch said, frowning slightly. “I thought this was a divination class.”

“Practical Prophecy, in fact,” an aged, wispy voice answered from the front of the room. Every eye turned toward the sound. A tall figure stood before the front desk, silhouetted against the blinding whiteness of the glass wall beyond. James could just make out a very long white beard threaded with iron grey, and a peaked hat of rich burgundy brocade. The figure waved for the class to assume their seats. “Divination and prophecy, you will discover, are quite different things. Quite different things indeed.”

James, Ralph and Zane sidled into seats in the middle of the three large, high tables. As Ralph unslung his bag and began to unpack his quill and parchment, he whispered, “Where’d he come from? He wasn’t there when we came in, and there’s only the one entrance.”

“It’s *maaagic*,” Zane explained dismissively. “Maybe he Apparated there or something.”

“You can’t apparate in Hog-” James began, and then interrupted himself. “Oh. Yeah. Things are probably way different here, aren’t they?”

The figure at the head desk waited for the students to produce their quills and parchments. Finally, when the room fell fully silent once again, he drew a deep breath and approached the tables.

“As you can see, there are none of my regular students in attendance this day,” he said calmly, indicating the many empty seats at the tables. “For the first time in the history of this class, I have granted them... a day off. It was necessary, you see, for me to apprise all of you on the rather different methods you will encounter here, methods which are quite standard procedure to my fellow Durmstrangs.”

The professor (who James realized had not yet given his name) began to pace around the perimeter of the tables. As he did so, his visage emerged from silhouette. James watched him with growing curiosity.

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There was something strangely familiar about him. He searched his memory as the professor went on.

“There are two primary differences between how we do things and how you are likely to have been taught. Firstly, many practitioners of the art of divination mistake it for an independent study. They trust their own singular interpretation of the sometimes frustratingly obscure mists of prophecy. This, as any scientist can tell you, is a haphazard and foolhardy method. Here, we follow a rigorous protocol of group divination, pooling our observations, averaging them, determining the validity of any prophecy by the unanimity of those who divine it.”

“Makes sense, actually,” Zane muttered. “Trelawney would roll over in her grave if she was dead.” He paused, blinking, and then added, “She’s *not* dead yet, right?”

James shook his head firmly, still straining his memory as he watched the professor. The old man moved with a sort of casual ease that bespoke great power, despite his seeming frailty. His hook nose and sallow cheeks were starkly offset by a pair of glittering, powder blue eyes. As he strode slowly up the other side of the tables, he raised one knobbly hand toward the left balcony.

“These, as you can see, are the tools of our corporate power. Here, there will be no individual divination via cards or tiny, random copies of magical objects. Here, we gather around us the most powerful prophetic tools in the magical universe, pooling our perception and focussing our strength.”

He lowered his hand as he returned to the front of the room. His probing blue eyes moved over the students. “The second difference you will encounter here is in what we choose to divine,” he announced calmly. “You will have been taught to know the future. This, as you have surely realized, is a half victory at best. Even if one does, by some luck and insight, determine what might be to come, he is no more prepared for that future than a student who has access to the next day’s exam questions. What we seek, and what is far more practical, are the tools to know how to manage that future. We seek not just the questions that will be posed to us, but the answers that will propel us forward.”

He stopped and moved closer, leaning on the front table, his grave face and clear eyes moving from student to student. “Here, we seek not just the knowledge of the battle that lies ahead, but the weapons that will help us win it.”

He paused. James studied the professor's face furiously. He knew he recognized that face from somewhere. Perhaps a chocolate frog card? Or perhaps he had met the professor once in the past, during a visit to the Ministry? It nagged at him, frustrating him.

"Now then," the professor went on. "Are there any questions?"

Zane's hand shot up. James glanced aside at his friend, and then toward the front of the room, where the professor stood, his gaze roaming calmly over the class. A strange thing happened as the professor's gaze alit on Zane's raised hand. His blue eyes hardened very slightly; his mouth tightened. And then, his gaze roamed onward, passing over Zane, ignoring him.

Trenton Bloch raised his hand.

The professor nodded toward him at once. "Mr. Bloch, I believe."

"Yes sir," Trenton said. "I was wondering about all the plants and stuff over there. Are you, like, renting out space to the Herbology department or something?"

There was a scattering of laughter, and even the professor smiled slightly. "You are perceptive to notice them, young man, but your assumption is quite incorrect. It may interest you to know that those, like the various objects opposite them, are tools of divination. Despite their appearance, however, they are not plants at all. Your own professor Longbottom would be quite mystified in any attempt to understand them."

The professor raised his right hand again, and this time he held a wand in his knucky fingers. He flicked it deftly, and James glanced to the right. The smallest of the potted flowers lofted gently into the air, trailing a tangle of hairy roots and vines from the edges of its pot. It began to drift out into the white sunlight over the tables.

"They do not grow," the professor announced, raising his voice slightly as the students craned to look. "They do not feed, at least in the manner of living things. They merely exist, as they have done for thousands of years before us. Their seeds-- if they can be said to sprout from anything-- are the abstracted thoughts of the most powerful wizard prophets of all the ages. Traditionally, they are called *yuxu başlatma*, or Dream Inducers."

The pot lowered over the tables and drifted toward the professor. As it hovered, its trailing roots snaked eerily. Its waxy bluish leaves

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rustled. Above these, bobbing slightly and turning like faces to observe the students below, were three fat, pulpy flowers, each larger than a human head and comprised of variegated orange-purple petals around a bristling yellow centre.

The professor reached up and very carefully, very delicately, plucked one of the petals. It fluttered in his fingers, as if caught in a light breeze despite the stillness of the room.

“Each Yuxa finds the person who requires it,” the professor went on, observing the disembodied petal in his hand. “If it chooses you, it behooves you to utilize it as soon as possible. *But,*” he added gravely, turning back to the class, “it must be utilized with *great care*. Improper use of Dream Inducers is dreadfully dangerous. Fortunately, the rules of use are exceedingly simple. Merely drop the petal in any liquid, then... drink.” The professor pantomimed dropping the petal into an invisible goblet for emphasis. “In precisely eleven minutes, the dream will overtake you. Assure that you are asleep when it does-- an easy task, since the Dream Inducer has a naturally tranquilizing effect-- and the prescribed prophecy will unfold before your sleeping mind, as vivid and clear as any waking experience.”

Trenton raised his hand again, somewhat hesitantly. “And what if you don’t get to sleep before the Dream Inducer starts to do its magic?”

“That,” the professor said in a low voice, using his wand to send the pot slowly back toward its perch, “would be a very poor choice. The dream, untethered from sleep, clashes with reality. Inflicted upon a waking mind, the dream is a nightmare of monstrous hallucinations. For the unfortunate witch or wizard, permanent, raving insanity is the result. For the fortunate... their brain will simply wilt, shrinking to nothing, leaving merely a living husk of flesh.”

Above the class, the pot clunked gently to the floor of the balcony. James gulped.

Zane raised his hand again.

“Are there any more questions, then?” the professor asked, raising his eyebrow benignly.

Zane raised his hand an inch further, nearly bouncing in his seat.

“Yes,” the professor acknowledged, lowering his gaze to a Beauxbatons girl in the front row. “Miss Desmarais I believe. Do go on.”

“I am wondering, sir,” the girl asked with only a trace of an accent, glancing back over the class, toward the open rear doors of the

room. “Where are the Durmstrang girls? Surely there are more than boys in this part of the world.”

“Indeed there are,” the professor admitted dismissively. “Durmstrang Academy believes in a deeply scholastic emphasis, without distraction. Thus, quite sensibly, the school is divided into two houses. The girls and boys of Durmstrang attend classes with those of their own gender, mingling only at meals and prescribed social gatherings.”

“But...” the Beauxbatons girl went on, frowning. “Why then are we not also separated?”

The professor sighed, showing a note of impatience. “Alas, the administrators of your various schools were rather insistent that, for economy’s sake, such double class scheduling would prove... ‘impossible.’”

“I *know* him,” James finally whispered, leaning aside toward Zane, whose hand was still raised. “I’m *sure* of it! I just can’t quite...”

“Professor,” Zane called out suddenly. “May I?”

The professor did not look at Zane. His eyes narrowed slightly as he regarded the petal that still fluttered in his raised hand. He sighed theatrically.

“Yes,” he said flatly. “Mr. Walker, then. What is it you feel you simply *must* ask?”

“Sir,” Zane said clearly. “I see Beauxbatons, Hogwarts and Alma Aleron students here. I was wondering, where are all the people from Yorke?”

The professor continued to stare at the petal in his fingers for a long moment, as if contemplating the question. Finally, his blue eyes slid toward Zane, coldly calculating.

“Who?” he asked, raising one grey eyebrow.

“The Yorke students,” Zane clarified. “You know. The Muggles, sir. Where are they?”

The room had fallen as still and quiet as a tomb. James realized it was rather warm in the room, despite the snowy mountain vista beyond the frosted windows.

“And why, pray tell,” the professor asked, enunciating each word with icy deliberation, “would such individuals have any place in a class of Prophecy? Please, young man,” he went on, holding up his left hand and closing his eyes, “do not deign to answer. You yourself are only here because your own school has, quite inexplicably, chosen to condescend to

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those of lesser heritage. I tolerate this in the name of diplomacy, but please, do not test my patience.” He sighed again and opened his eyes, scanning the rest of the class. “The rest of us surely understand that it is no benefit to the Muggle to place them in a situation where their, ah, *inherent inadequacies* would be laid bare for all to see. It would be an embarrassment and an injustice to subject them to such humiliation. Thus, as a gesture of... *compassion*... Durmstrang Academy has prohibited their entry. I am quite sure that most of us can appreciate and honour this decision.”

James shivered, the warmth of the room dispelled by the coldness of the professor’s words. Next to him, Zane finally lowered his hand.

As he did so, the professor seemed to relax slightly. He held up the petal once again. “Finally,” he said evenly, gazing at the fluttering shape in his hand. “Let us see who the Yuxa chooses. This one, you might be interested to know, is one of the more whimsical Dream Inducers. It imparts foreknowledge of love. Will you marry or die alone? Will you be beloved by someone else, or love anonymously from afar, doomed to a life of unrequited passion? You will learn no names, but you will know the shape of your romantic future, be it delightful or destitute. To whom does the Dream Inducer choose to reveal its secrets?”

With that, the professor released the petal. Immediately, it fluttered up into the air like a purple-orange scarf, twisting and wafting on invisible currents. The class watched, wide eyed and rapt, as it began to descend, circling over the tables. Finally, silently, it dropped to the first table, directly onto the parchment of the Beauxbatons girl, Desmarais. She looked down at it, both nervous and intrigued.

“It is yours, Miss Desmarais,” the professor said with a small smile. “You may do with it as you wish. Use it, or do not. There is no mandate that you must. You now know the instructions for use of the Dream Inducer, and the dangers if you do not follow them to the letter. The rest is in your capable hands.”

The girl gingerly picked up the petal and cupped it in her hands. Experimentally, she sniffed it, and then invited her friends to do the same. As she did so, the professor pocketed his wand and produced a pair of spectacles from his robes. He put them on, apparently preparing to dismiss the class early, but James suddenly gasped in his seat.

The spectacles-- a pair of tiny glass half-moons on a simple wire frame-- had been the missing element. Now in place on the professor’s

nose, they formed the final piece that completed the puzzle. James knew where he had seen the professor before, although he could not bring himself to believe it. It was ridiculous and impossible.

“What’s with you, James,” Ralph whispered, nudging him with an elbow. “You look like you’re trying to swallow a hippogriff egg.”

“The professor!” James rasped, staring at the man before them began to distribute a sheaf of notes to the class. “Look at him! Just look!”

“I’m looking,” Zane muttered darkly. “So what?”

“Don’t you see it? He’s... it’s...”

“What?” Ralph hissed nervously, glancing from James to the professor.

James boggled. He could barely bring himself to say it. The last time he had seen that face, it had been on a portrait in the headmaster’s office, smiling enigmatically, its eye twinkling behind its half-moon spectacles.

James gestured helplessly with one hand and flopped back in his seat.

“It’s Dumbledore,” he whispered, shaking his head with disbelief. “It can’t be, of course. It’s impossible. But it is. That... is Headmaster Albus Dumbledore.”



James knew it was ridiculous. Albus Dumbledore was long since dead, killed-- albeit mercifully and according to prior agreement-- by Professor Severus Snape, who succeeded him as headmaster during the dark season of Voldemort’s final days.

It didn’t help that nobody else quite saw the resemblance, at least not as strongly as he did.

“I *sorta* see it,” Zane admitted after class, cocking his head and squinting thoughtfully. “But really, isn’t it just that characteristic ‘crusty

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old wizard' look that they all seem to have? Peaked hat, long beard, old-fashioned glasses, yadda-yadda. They probably all shop at the same store for flighty ancient wizard types.”

Ralph was perusing the professor's hand-out as they filed out of Durmstrang castle, led again by the stoic Volkiev.

“Here's his name right on the top of the page,” he said, frowning intently. “Looks pretty dense and Durmstrangy. Dorcha... Dorchascathan? First name Avior. No wonder he didn't introduce himself.”

Later that night, Rose and Scorpius were sceptical enough to be dismissive.

“He didn't just *look* a little bit like him,” James insisted, gathered with the others at their regular table in the corner of the Gryffindor common room. “But it wasn't like it was Dumbledore's identical twin, either. It *was* Dumbledore, but... changed somehow. Different...”

“So it was an old professor that looked a lot like another old professor,” Scorpius clarified sardonically, “except where he was completely different, came from another country, and has a totally different Muggle-hating pureblood attitude. Somebody get the Ministry on the Floo. This mystery is obviously out of our league.”

“It wasn't just that they looked alike,” James muttered, plopping his chin onto his crossed arms. “Look at their names! Albus Dumbledore, Avior Dorchascathan. Same initials! He even talked and moved and worked magic the same way. I've been hearing my dad talk about Dumbledore the headmaster since I was a kid. I feel like I know him almost as well as he did. Maybe I should ask him about it.”

“Absolutely not!” Rose suddenly interjected, looking up sharply from her Arithmancy textbook. “Not unless you want to dig up all the worst kind of memories from his past. Headmaster Dumbledore was the closest thing Uncle Harry ever had to a father-- and he watched him get killed right before his eyes. You go telling him that there's some half-evil Doppelganger of Dumbledore running around, there's a part of him that will *want* to believe it, trained Auror or not. That wouldn't be fair to him, James.”

James opened his mouth to argue, but then closed it. His cousin was right. For now, it would be best to investigate this particular mystery without his father's involvement. After all, if James was right, the existence of a sort of bizarre twin of one of his father's most revered heroes

would indeed be quite unsettling. What if they ever had to fight or something? Would his father even be able to do it?

But that was silly. He shook his head, dispelling the very idea.

"I'm going to get to the bottom of it," he said firmly. "It isn't just that this Avior wizard looks and acts like Dumbledore. He's powerful like him, too. Way more so than some cranky old Prophecy teacher should be."

"Do you want to know what I think, Potter?" Scorpius asked, adopting his loftiest tone of voice.

James shook his head firmly and leaned over his homework. "Not in the least."

"I think you *need* this sort of drama," the blonde boy went on, undaunted. "I think you've gotten so used to being in the centre of huge, dramatic conspiracies that you're beginning to see them everywhere."

James flipped some pages in his textbook. "That's just stupid. You don't know what you're talking about. I didn't *want* to notice that Avior and Dumbledore are basically the same person."

Rose looked up sheepishly. "Just the other night you were sitting in that exact same spot telling us about how Zane's new girlfriend is some sort of secret vampire animagus spy or something. It does seem a bit much, James."

James felt a mixture of embarrassment and anger redden his cheeks. Suddenly he was very glad he had not mentioned the mysterious disembodied voice he had heard in the corridor on first night. "You're both daft," he said in a low voice, angrily staring down at his books. "You'd have to be blind not to see that Nastasia is trouble."

"Perhaps," Scorpius admitted airily, taking off his glasses and closing his books. "Or perhaps your sister is right and you're just jealous. Nastasia *is* sort of intriguing. If, that is, you fancy somewhat odd girls with sketchy, troubled backgrounds."

James glanced up at Scorpius, his brow furrowed. Was he comparing Nastasia to Petra? Scorpius merely looked back, his eyebrows lifted, a small smile on the corners of his mouth.

After a moment James shook his head and looked back down at his homework. He didn't want to admit it, but Scorpius had struck a nerve. It wasn't that Nastasia and Petra were anything alike. In fact, it was hard to imagine two girls who were more different. And yet...

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Later that night, James did something he hadn't done in months. Before changing into his pyjamas, he took something out of his back pocket and laid it on his bed. It was a small packet of parchment, folded into a seamless envelope. He sat down next to it with a deep sigh, produced his wand, and tapped it.

"*Revelierus*," he whispered.

The packet blossomed like a paper flower, revealing a small sheaf of pages. The pages had once contained a story-- a retelling of a dream-- written in Petra Morganstern's neat cursive handwriting. She had given it to him the previous year, during their voyage to America. On that same voyage, something strange-- and powerfully magical-- had occurred between the two of them. At the height of a freak storm, Petra had gotten swept overboard, avoiding being tossed into the heaving waves by a mere length of broken rigging. James had eventually saved her, but in a way that neither of them fully understood. Something had connected them that night, a sort of unbreakable silvery cord, running from his hand to hers, saving her from the doom she seemed to wish for. For in fact, some part of Petra had *wanted* to die that night. James had stopped her, saved her by tapping into her own seemingly limitless magic, using the key of his unspoken love for her.

And that magic was still there. The silvery cord, now invisible, still somehow connected them. He could feel it sometimes, especially when Petra was close by. Mostly, however, there was the erstwhile dream story. The packet of parchments had become a sort of portal into her thoughts, one that only the two of them knew about. Petra had communicated through it once before. Perhaps she would do so again.

He leaned over the parchment, studying it by the dim moonlight of the nearby window.

It wasn't a note this time. It was still covered in Petra's handwriting, but scribbled now, with lines overlapping other lines, some scrawled in large, looping slashes, others crammed into tight, indecipherable paragraphs and clusters. James could only make out a few words, although very little of it made sense: *Judith... Izzy... fates... Marshall Parris... trans-mundane... talisman... the Collector...*

And in larger print, scribbled so haphazardly that it was almost unreadable: *The Morrigan Web*.

It was all disconnected, random, as if all of Petra's most fevered thoughts had been scrawled at once, blindly, and with no relationship to

one another. James wasn't sure what, exactly, he had been looking for, but one thing was certain: there were no answers to be found here. He shivered, shook his head, and then tapped the parchment once again, sealing it shut. He hid the dream story away in his trunk, closed and locked it carefully, then got ready for bed.

Had it really been Petra that had whispered to him in the halls on first night? It certainly hadn't sounded like her. The voice had been feminine, but *mad* somehow. The memory of it sent a shudder down his spine.

He remembered his father's voice from the common room grate: *it was Petra, son... she flickered on and off, fluctuating all over the corridor. And then, she was just gone again.*

James shivered again as he climbed into his bed.

Petra was powerful. So powerful that even the great Merlinus Ambrosius had failed to stop her. Perhaps the power was simply more than she could contain. Perhaps (though it pained him greatly to consider it) the Petra he had known-- and secretly fallen in love with-- truly was no more.

It was, to be sure, a deeply sad and tragic thought.

He rolled over.

Eventually, he slept.



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As the first week of school wound down, James and Ralph attended their first class at Beauxbatons, Advanced Arithmetics, and finally understood what Rose had warned them about.

The class was held in a high tower room of the Beauxbatons palace, which was (to James' eye) much newer, brighter, and gilded with wall frescoes, bevelled crystal windows and glittering gold chandeliers than Hogwarts. The Arithmetics classroom was high and airy, with open windows along one side and a wall of mirrors on the other, reflecting the light and seemingly doubling the room's size. The parquet floor was filled with a collection of strange frames, each as tall as James himself and divided by rows of metal rods strung with heavy glass beads. Beauxbatons students gathered before the frames in their immaculate powder blue silk robes, studiously sliding the beads and producing an oddly insectile clicking noise that filled the otherwise silent room.

James and Ralph stopped in the doorway, baffled.

"What are we supposed to do?" Ralph muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

Another boy pushed between them, his eyes lighting up behind his glasses. "Oh! I've seen these before," he proclaimed. "Abacus! Or abaci, plural, to be precise. But look at the size of them!"

James frowned at the boy and saw that it was Morton Comstock, the Muggle from Yorke Academy. He was followed into the room by two other boys and a pig-tailed girl with braces. She glanced at James furtively then looked quickly away. James recognized her from some of his other classes, including Wizlit. She had been part of the throng that had waylaid Professor Revalvier-- and himself-- in the library, enamoured with the idea that their beloved Harry Potter stories were actually real. Outside of that mob, however, the girl (whose name, James recalled, was Lucia) was apparently much less bold. She quickly ducked behind an unmanned abacus and peeked back through its rods and beads.

James glanced around for a teacher but there didn't seem to be any present. "So, what's an abacus?"

Comstock scoffed loudly. "An ancient calculator, precursor to the modern computer. Finally, a tool that makes sense in this crazy backwards magical universe of yours." He adjusted his glasses and glanced toward a large chalkboard at the head of the room. It was crammed with dense sequences of numbers, geometric diagrams, and formulae. "Oh, I see," he said smugly. "We're resolving a series of programmatic

coordinates based on a predefined time-space wavelength. Time travel, perhaps. Or maybe...

"Space travel?" a crew-cut Muggle boy suggested hopefully.

"That's ridiculous," Ralph scowled, installing himself uncertainly behind one of the huge abaci. He glanced at James. "Er, right?"

James shrugged. Tentatively, he reached forward and touched one of the glass beads. "So... how's it work, then?"

"Ave all you worked wiz applied Arithmetics before?" asked an older Beauxbatons girl without a trace of a smile, addressing the newcomers.

Comstock pushed his glasses up his nose with one stubby finger. "I've plotted hyperspace coordinates for faster-than-light travel in every space game since *Galaxy Quest Ninety-Nine*. This looks like a standard event-aversion matrix, but it isn't collision based, as far as I can tell." He frowned at the beads in front of him for a moment, then, seemingly at random, shucked four green ones to the right, two red ones to the left, and counted off seven blue beads, moving only one with a sharp, decisive click.

"Very good," the Beauxbatons girl admitted grudgingly. "Carry on, zen. But please be extremely careful. Professor Moreau 'as entrusted 'is return to us. If you do not know exactly what you are doing, zen please, *do... nothing*."

"That's my favourite thing of all to do," Graham quipped, dropping his book bag to the floor and promptly sitting on it. James glanced at him, and then at Ralph, who merely shrugged.

Comstock shuffled a few more beads and shook his head. "Honestly, the gaps in your schooling are big enough to drive a lorry through," he muttered. "No wonder you people can't find any work in the real world."

"Just keep pushing beads, spod," Graham replied breezily.

James narrowed his eyes slightly. Keeping his voice low, he asked, "What do you mean, 'in the real world?'"

"You know what I mean," Comstock answered. "Where the rest of us all live. Where we have light bulbs and rockets and where history isn't stuck somewhere in the middle ages. We're here to learn about you lot, but it seems to me that it's going to be a lot harder for you magical types to adjust to *us* now that our worlds are about to come together."

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“Who says our worlds are about to come together?” Graham asked pointedly, lowering his own voice beneath the constant shuffling click of the classroom.

“Duh,” Comstock said with a roll of his eyes. “The Night of the Unveiling? Your vow of secrecy was broken when that crazy witch revealed everything last year. People are still trying to cover it all up, at least for a while, but the secret’s out. Pretty soon, our world and your world are going to collide. That’s why we’re here. We’re sort of like the front line, preparing the way. That’s what Miss Corsica tells us.”

James had been preparing an angry response to Comstock’s little tirade, but suddenly he glanced at the boy, wide-eyed.

“Miss who?” he asked in a harsh whisper.

“Miss Corsica,” Comstock repeated. “She’s our mediator between your schools and ours, and she’s totally got your number. She says she’s been studying the magical world her whole life and knows you lot like the back of her hand. She says that most of you are totally unprepared for how to deal with the ‘Muggle’ world. Apparently there are a few ‘enlightened’ witches and wizards, but I sure haven’t met any yet.”

“Morton!” Lucia, the pigtailed girl, hissed from her own abacus. “Shut it, you big berk!”

Comstock shrugged. “Who cares if they know? They’ll find out soon enough, anyway.”

James shifted his stunned gaze to Ralph. “Corsica?” he whispered. “Could it be?”

Ralph merely shook his head and frowned. “Can’t be *Tabitha* Corsica.”

Lucia peeked through her abacus again. “You *know* her?”

James glanced at her. “I don’t know. If it’s who we’re thinking of... that would be...”

“Hilarious,” Graham nodded with a grin.

“We’ll find out tomorrow, maybe,” Ralph said. “We’ve got our first class there at Yorke. If she’s their mediator, then she’ll probably be there.”

James nodded uncertain agreement. Was it possible that Tabitha Corsica had been sent to the Muggle school to manage the exchange program? Wouldn’t his dad have known about that? And if it was true, what did it mean?

Later that evening, as dinner concluded in the great hall and the enchanted ceiling began to twinkle with early stars, James and Ralph watched the enormous Clock over the head table. When it gonged the quarter hour before seven, they made their way to the tall cabinet with the double eagle carvings.

Rose met them there dressed in her uniform, a smart pink cardigan slung over her shoulders.

“You’re not really going like that, are you?” she asked sharply, looking them up and down.

“What do you mean?” James blinked, glancing down at his jeans and tee shirt. “It’s an extra-curricular club. No uniforms required. Besides, what do you know about how Americans dress?”

“Enough to know I don’t want to look like them,” Rose sniffed.

Ralph cocked his head. “What, you’re not coming, too, are you?”

“I certainly am,” she replied primly. “You two aren’t going to have all the fun this year. We’re dying to take a look at Alma Aleron, and since this is the end of our school day, it’s the perfect time for it. Besides, Zane promised he’d sneak us all around the campus.”

Ralph nodded speculatively. “Sounds like Zane.”

“Hold up,” James said, “Who’s ‘we’?”

“Scorpius and me,” Rose answered lightly, glancing back over the hall. “Here he comes now. But you two can probably come along if you wish. We won’t mind.”

James nodded sarcastically. “Oh, thanks loads.”

Scorpius joined them in front of the Alma Aleron cabinet, dressed in a natty pair of khakis and a white button-down shirt. “I see the gang is all here,” he announced wryly, looking askance at James and Ralph and obviously refraining from commenting about their clothing. “Shall we, then?”

James rolled his eyes. “Let’s go already.”

The four crammed together into the cabinet, which just contained them. Scorpius pulled the door shut.

The cabinet interior fell dark, and then flashed bright, electric blue. As one, all four students jumped. When all eight feet plunked back to the floor, the cabinet doors popped open again, now revealing a bright afternoon sky studded with clouds. Chestnut trees shushed in the near distance, overshadowing colourful gardens, fountains and statuary. Paths

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looped across a pristine lawn, connecting the blocky brick buildings that lined either side.

“Smell that!” Rose declared, stepping out into the sunlight. “Honeysuckle!”

Ralph looked up at the sun, then down at his watch. “It’s just after lunchtime here,” he announced. “All I smell is goulash from the cafeteria in admin hall.”

“Oh, quit showing off, Deedle,” Scorpius grouched, following the troop out onto the footpath. “Everyone knows you spent last year here.”

James glanced back as the cabinet doors clunked shut. Here, the cabinet was decorated with a colourfully painted woodcut of the Hogwarts crest, nearly as big as the doors themselves. The cabinet itself rested in the shadow of a large awning, situated in the centre of Alma Aleron’s long, grassy mall. Three other cabinets sat beneath the awning, each facing a different direction.

“Greetings mates!” Zane called, approaching from the direction of the gigantic brick building at the head of the mall. “Right on time. Everyone ready to have fun and do some wild and crazy stuff?”

“Just lead on, Walker,” Scorpius instructed. “Save the American uber-enthusiasm for the tourists.”

“Oh, that’s funny, I thought that’s what *you* were.” Zane said brightly, cocking his head and tapping his chin with one finger.

“Patches!” James cried suddenly, grinning. “Look, Ralph!”

A short-haired calico cat came trotting lightly along the path, stopping in a dapple of bright sunlight. It sat down on its haunches and preened itself, waiting to be petted.

“Aww!” Rose proclaimed shrilly, striding forward and dropping to one knee next to the cat. “This is Patches? I remember you talking about him last year! What a pretty, smart little kitty you are...”

James glanced back at Scorpius, waiting for a sarcastic comment. Scorpius, who seemed to be in a particularly foul mood for some reason, merely looked away, distaste etched all over his face.

“Welcome to the Aleron,” Zane announced, unperturbed. “This here is the mall. Back that way is Zombie house, universally agreed to be the best house on campus. And over there is Administration Hall, our destination. That concludes the tour for now. Let’s roll or we’re gonna be all kinds of late.”

The group began to make their way along the sun-dappled path, followed casually by Patches the cat, who seemed to take every opportunity to rub up against Rose's leg as she walked.

"See?" she said adoringly, "He likes me! What a smart kitty."

As they approached the bulky shape of Admin Hall, James took a moment to look around at the campus and the knots of students heading to class or lounging in the sun. It was all very familiar to him, and rather comforting to come back to. On his right was the theatre where Professor Longbottom had given his lecture on Herbology. Beyond this was Faculty Row, where Petra and Izzy had lived briefly, before the debacle that had led to Petra's arrest. And just peeking over the tops of the distant trees was Pepperpock Down, the Clutchcudgel stadium, its banners waving cheerfully against the deep blue of the sky.

Zane led the gathering up the Admin Hall steps two at a time. As they passed into the shadow of the high clock tower, the clock itself began to gong the hour.

"Ask not for whom the bell tolls," Zane called back. "It tolls for us. Chancellor Franklyn won't wait around."

"Wait around?" Ralph huffed, straggling behind. "Is he going somewhere?"

"Just you wait, Ralphinator," Zane answered with a backwards glance. "X-Comm's gotten totally quantum since Professor Jackson got involved. Who'd have thought that crusty old Stonewall would have any cool ideas about how to use technomancy for actual fun?"

Scorpius frowned. "Fun?"

"Yeah," James admitted, "That doesn't sound like Stonewall at all."

Zane passed through the propped open double doors of Admin Hall and angled toward a wide staircase. "Well, I wouldn't say the word 'fun' in front of *him*," he admitted, lowering his voice in the echoing main hall. "But a lark's a lark, and what he and Franklyn have come up with has definite possibilities. We're hoping to try it out for the first time today."

Before James could ask if Professor Jackson was going to be there, Zane reached the top of the staircase and turned left into a narrow doorway. Rose followed and James heard her proclamation of amazement as she stepping into the comparatively dark room.

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It was stuffy on the second floor, but much more so in the confines of the cramped room, which was cluttered with all manner of gizmos, devices and machinery. Most of it, James noticed as he looked around, seemed to be broken or disassembled, stacked and labelled on shelves and against the far wall, blocking the windows and their pulled, drab shades. A huge work table stood in the furthest reaches of the room, its surface crowded with tools, monstrous mouldy books, and what looked like a half-built clockwork giant.

“Just imagine the nightmare of a Gauntlet that Professor Debellow would build out of all *this*,” Ralph muttered, squinting in the dusty dimness.

Movement behind the work table caught James’ eye. He glanced up to see a strange, shambling figure emerge. Its eyes glowed green on the ends of telescopic brass stalks and its hands were complicated metal claws, snickering and ratcheting alarmingly. James stumbled back from it, bumping into Ralph, who bumped into Scorpius, nearly knocking the blond boy to the floor.

“Ah!” the shambling figure said, straightening. “Mr. Walker and friends. Is it one o’clock already? I seem to have lost all track of time.” Clumsily, the figure seemed to strip off its huge claws, stacking them haphazardly on the table and revealing human hands beneath. With a brisk sigh, it pushed back a pair of complicated goggles, resting them atop a balding head crowned with longish grey hair.

“Chancellor Franklyn!” Rose exclaimed excitedly, nearly clapping her hands with pleasure.

“At your service,” the chancellor answered with a smile. “Welcome to my laboratory, all of you, and thank you very much for your willingness to aid in the advancement of science and invention for the betterment of mankind, etcetera, etcetera... er...” he trailed off, patting his many pockets. “Has anyone seen my spectacles, perchance?”

Zane shook his head and glanced back at the others. “This is just *one* of his laboratories,” he stage-whispered, cupping one hand to the side of his mouth. “The one under the Igors’ mansion is a cavern. An actual cavern! With stalactites and bats and everything!”

“Much less glamorous than it sounds, I fear,” Franklyn admitted, now patting along the work table in search of his glasses. “Please, Mr. Walker, if you would introduce everyone. I fear I am rather at a loss for the moment.”

Zane nodded. “Sure thing, Chancellor. You’ve already met James Potter and Ralph Deedle, of course. This other happy camper is Scorpius Malfoy. And finally, the rose between all the thorns, Rose Weasley, cat lover and girl genius.”

“Yes,” Franklyn nodded, distracted. “Thank you. I do recall Mr. Potter and Mr. Deedle, of course.”

Of course, James thought, and he probably isn’t all that thrilled to see us again, after everything that happened last year, including the opening of the Nexus Curtain and the Night of the Unveiling.

A narrow door creaked suddenly open at the back of the room, admitting a tall, imposing figure. Professor Jackson saw the troop gathered before the work table and lifted his chin, his dark eyebrows lowering slightly.

“I see our test subjects have arrived,” he said coolly. “Welcome back Mr. Potter, Mr. Deedle. You have brought friends this time.”

“Greetings, General!” Zane announced, snapping off a stiff salute. “Proud to be of service. Is everything all set for go?”

Jackson eyed Zane for a long moment, and then turned to the Chancellor.

“I believe we are ready, Benjamin. Send them in whenever they are prepared. Mr. Hernandez and I will remain behind in the event of any... miscalculation.”

Franklyn seemed to abandon the search for his glasses. He nodded. “Very well, then. Thank you, Professor. We will join you in just a moment.”

Jackson accepted this stoically, looked over the assembly once more with apparent distaste, and then stepped back through the door, closing it with a clunk.

“Now then,” Franklyn said, smiling a bit myopically at the students. “As I expect you know, this is an unaccredited club. There are no grades given. No awards or prizes. Simply put, our goal is knowledge. Success is measured in results, be they negative or positive. There is little danger involved, so long as you do precisely what I say. Are there any questions?”

Rose glanced around at James and Ralph, grinning eagerly and bouncing on her toes.

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Scorpius raised his hand a bit impatiently. “We are, I understand, primarily concerned with experimental forms of magical communication. Is that correct?”

Franklyn nodded quickly. “Yes, yes, of course. We have, however, with the assistance of Professor Jackson, enhanced and broadened our scope rather a bit, Mister... er, Malfoy. Yes.” he said, removing the goggles heavily from his head, plunking them to the desk, and brushing off his waistcoat. “Rather than relying solely on the sending of messages via facsimile, we have begun to consider the idea of more direct and reliable methods, foregoing the inherent complication of third-party means of transference. In short, rather than merely broadcasting our message to distant locations...”

“We’re just going there ourselves,” Zane interrupted with a grin.

“Temporarily, of course,” Franklyn clarified, raising a finger. “This is by no means a replacement for apparition or Floo network. On the contrary, we are experimenting with pre-programmed trans-dimensional portals, capable of being carried by the user and utilized for very specific physical communication between defined locations.”

“They’re like personal Portkeys!” Zane piped up.

“Yes,” Franklyn admitted hesitantly. “Er, in a manner of speaking. The beauty of these devices is their simplicity. They can be used by anyone, easily, and with no training. Even children, with no Disapparation skills or license, may be able to easily communicate physically to any pre-defined location. Assuming, of course, that Professor Jackson’s technomantic calculations prove accurate and repeatable. Not to doubt his abilities, of course.”

“Of course,” Zane agreed a bit too quickly, glancing around at the others.

“Shall we, then?” Franklyn said, gesturing (rather vaguely) toward the door in the back wall. “Of course, anyone unwilling to participate in the experiment may feel free to opt out with no shame.” He squinted over the students. “Anyone?”

“Into the breach,” Zane announced, “Come on, Rose. In for a Drummel, in for a Jack!”

He led the group around the work table toward the battered rear door, which Franklyn opened with another juddering creak. Filing through one at a time, James was last to enter, following Ralph into a much smaller and darker room, nearly empty except for a single tiny table

in the centre of the floor, lit by one candle. A collection of glimmering silvery rings were arranged around the candle in pairs. The group approached them curiously.

“Six of us,” Franklyn said, leaning over the table and squinting, “And six pairs of the charmed devices. How fortuitous. Everyone, please collect exactly one pair each, but *do not* put any of them on your fingers yet. Professor Jackson and Mr Hernandez, in the office beyond this room, will be recording everything from this moment onward for the Archive.”

James peered at the table and its collection of gleaming rings. Zane snatched up a pair and bounced them on the palm of his hand. Carefully, Rose reached for a pair herself. James, Ralph and Scorpius followed suit.

“Excellent,” Franklyn nodded, taking the last pair. “You will notice that each pair of rings contains two slight variations in colour. One ring will have a golden hue, the other a distinct green. These colours are important, as they determine which ring is outgoing, and which is incoming. Assure that you can easily tell the difference.”

James looked down at the rings in his hand. They were strangely heavy and cold to the touch, noticeably glowing more than the meager candlelight could account for. One ring did indeed have a pale golden sheen, while the other reflected a greenish tint.

Franklyn went on, “The best practice seems to be to place the rings in different pockets. Golden on the left for outgoing, green on the right for the return trip. Operation of the rings is simplicity itself: simply place it on your finger. The technomancy is rather complex, but the effect seems to be instantaneous. Once you arrive at your destination, return is facilitated by simply switching the rings. Does everyone understand?”

Rose examined the rings in her hand studiously. “Didn’t I read about something like this once?” she asked suspiciously. “Something from a children’s book?”

Franklyn nodded a bit stiffly. “Yes, well... the magical ring is rather a popular concept in fiction, of course. There can hardly be only a single example--”

“Yeah!” James proclaimed with a smile. “My Mum read them to me! The rings were yellow and green, just like this! And there was this boy and a girl who used them to travel between worlds! And then there was this tree that got turned into a magical wardrobe when it was all over, and--”

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“Yes, yes, fine, thank you!” Franklyn interrupted impatiently. “Feel free to call it an homage if you like. Good magic is wherever you find it. Now then, are there any questions about the *actual operation* of the rings, if you please?”

Ralph raised his hand nervously. “Er. What... what happens if we accidentally put both rings on at once?”

Both Franklyn and Zane turned and looked hard at Ralph, blinking. After a long moment, Franklyn cleared his throat. “Let us... er, simply assume that that would be a rather disastrous error. Thank you for bringing it up, Mr. Deedle. All of you: under no circumstance should you attempt to wear both rings at once. Are we clear?”

There were hearty nods all around.

“Yes,” Franklyn nodded, “Well then. For safety’s sake, this particular experimental set of rings will merely take us to the north end of the campus. I attempted this myself some hours ago with apparent success. This time we shall hopefully prove that the results can be duplicated, and in numbers. Is everyone prepared? Excellent. On the count of three, then.”

Franklyn retrieved the golden ring from his left waistcoat pocket, held it up in his left hand and extended his right ring finger before it. Quickly, everyone else did the same.

“One,” Franklyn said stiffly.

“Two” Zane and Franklyn said together. James saw that Zane was grinning eagerly, glancing around at the nervous faces of his friends.

“Three!”

James jammed the golden ring onto his finger. In an instant, his finger grew to shocking length, stretching away into sudden darkness. In the blink of an eye, his hand followed, then his arm, pulling him bodily into a stretched blur of speed. The room vanished away, replaced by a wild smear of colours. Then, with a sort of mental *twang*, he snapped back into his proper shape and the world reclaimed him.

Zane was still standing across from him-- everyone, in fact, was in the same position relative to each other as they had been a second before-- only now the group was standing on the sunlit grass of Pepperpock Down. Nearby, a group of Werewolf house students jogged in formation, circling the field and barking hoarse chants with military precision.

“Excellent!” Franklyn proclaimed with uncharacteristic excitement. “Smashing success! Well done, everyone!”

James glanced around at the high rampart grandstands and raised team platforms, a helpless smile dawning on his face. “Last time I was here,” he said with a sigh, “We were winning the Clutch tournament for the Bigfoots.”

“Good times,” Zane agreed fervently. “The Wolves still haven’t gotten over it. They’ve had to actually learn to play the game ever since Albus and Professor Jackson blasted their lucky statue. We face them the first time next Friday and everyone is predicting a Zombie win by a mile.”

“Impressive, I suppose,” Scorpius said blandly, glancing up at a few skim-riders swooping high overhead, practicing laps through the floating Clutchcudgel rings. “If you’ve never seen a Quidditch match, that is.”

“I admit I am rather a fan of the Quaffle myself,” Franklyn said, still nearly overflowing with good cheer. “But nevertheless, shall we attempt--”

A glassy crunch emanated from beneath the Chancellor’s boot as he stepped forward. A pained look creased his face as he looked down.

“Good news, Chancellor!” Zane announced, dropping to one knee and retrieving something from the grass. “I found your spectacles!” He held up the square wireframe glasses, now rather hopelessly squashed, their lenses broken. “You must have dropped them when you zapped out here this morning.”

“I can *reparo* them, sir!” Rose jumped forward, brandishing her wand.

“No, thank you, Miss Weasley,” Franklyn sighed, taking the spectacles gingerly from Zane. “I’m afraid they’ve been magically repaired so many times that the lenses can no longer remember their original prescription. There is nothing for it but to have them reground and fitted in the traditional manner.” He pocketed the broken glasses carefully, then patted the pocket and smiled. “Still, it is a good reminder of what is perhaps the most important life lesson of all for witches and wizards.”

Rose looked quizzically up at him. “What life lesson is that, Chancellor?”

He smiled sincerely, and then laughed a little. “That not everything in life can-- or even should-- be solved by magic alone. If there is one thing I still hope to truly learn in all my centuries, it is that one, simple thing.”

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James considered this, and then glanced aside at Scorpius. The blond boy shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“What’s with you, Scorpius?” James asked in a low voice.

Scorpius scowled and looked away. “*You* are. I suppose that explains a lot, yes?”

It was an insult, but it was so bald and pointless that James almost laughed. “You really are in a snit, aren’t you? Does it maybe have anything to do with all your little midnight outings?”

Scorpius glanced at him sharply. “What do you know about that?” he whispered. “Have you been spying on me?”

James nodded. “Yeah, that’s all I do every night: sit up and watch your bed to see what you’re up to. We all do. It’s sort of an obsession.”

Scorpius relaxed slightly. “You’re amusing, Potter. I’ll make you a deal. You stay out of my affairs, I’ll stay out of yours.”

James considered this, and then shrugged. “We’ll see.”

Behind them, the others seemed to be preparing for the return trip.

“Golden rings off, then,” Franklyn announced jovially. “Good thinking from our friend Mr. Deedle, that! None of us would want to end up stretched between here and Administration Hall, am I correct?” The idea seemed suddenly rather amusing to the old inventor as he chuckled to himself.

Zane had picked up on Franklyn’s good spirits. “Nothing as enjoyable as an experiment that works out as hoped, right Chancellor?”

“How right you are, Mr. Walker,” Franklyn agreed, pocketing his golden ring and producing the green-tinted one. “How right you are indeed. So! Shall we count off for the return trip, then?”

James plucked off his own golden ring, stuffing it into his jeans pocket. Along with the rest of the troop, he raised his green ring and held it before his left ring finger.

“One!” they all counted off together. “Two! *Three!*”

The return trip was exactly like the outgoing journey, but in reverse. For a split-second, James’ body seemed to be stretched like taffy between two distant points. Then, with a reverberating *twang*, the darkened laboratory room snapped into place around them.

“Smashing!” Franklyn proclaimed happily, plucking the green ring from his finger. “Exhilarating, even! Why, I can imagine an entire

range of therapeutic side-benefits to this procedure. I do believe my joints have not felt this limber since I was a hundred and fifty!”

Shortly, the group retreated to the main laboratory, where Franklyn launched into an enthusiastic explanation of his gigantic clockwork mechanical man, the very device he had been working on when they had first arrived. The rest of the hour, unfortunately, was given over to a rather dull debriefing of their experiment, conducted by Professor Jackson in his typically dry, staid manner. The professor took copious notes of every detail, showing specific interest in the stretching sensation everyone experienced at the instant of transference.

“This could present a rather serious limitation, Benjamin,” he commented, studying his notes. “Even under magical influence, the human form can only disincorporate so much before re-incorporation becomes unstable.”

“Oh, fiddlesticks, Theodore,” Franklyn insisted, completely unperturbed. “You are far too careful. Disapparation is many orders of magnitude more chaotic than what we experienced.”

“Perhaps,” Jackson admitted stoically. “But I suspect a greater multiplication of the effect over distances. This experiment sent you barely five hundred yards away. What will happen with distances measured in tens or thousands of miles?”

“Risk!” Franklyn laughed. “Risk and analysis! These are the hallmarks of scientific and technomantic progress. You shall see, my friend. Everything will work itself out in time.”

Jackson nodded sceptically.

“Professors,” Zane suddenly piped up. “It’s nearly two o’clock. We should all be getting back to our classes, shouldn’t we?”

Franklyn looked shocked. “Oh, my goodness gracious me. Is it that time already? Yes, yes, of course, we should all be on our way. My afternoon Defence students are expecting a rather impressive demonstration of the Herculean Heave-ho method for fighting giants. I’ve asked Professor Bunyan to assist. I will surely be regretting that particular exercise tomorrow morning. Nonetheless...”

He stood, once more patting his pockets for his spectacles. Hearing the glassy crunch of his broken glasses again, he shook his head ruefully. “Not everything can be fixed with magic,” he repeated with a smile. “But that doesn’t help me get to Defensive Techniques without falling into a fountain. Theodore, would you be kind enough to, er...?”

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Professor Jackson raised his bushy black eyebrows inquiringly, and then seemed to realize what the chancellor was requesting.

“Happy to be of service,” he answered grumpily, implying quite the reverse. “Lady,” he said, nodding once to Rose, “Gentlemen. Good afternoon. Mr. Walker, I trust you will see your friends back to their cabinet.”

Zane saluted again. “Sir, yes, sir!”

A moment later, Jackson’s and Franklyn’s footsteps could be heard echoing down the stairs beyond the laboratory door.

“So,” Rose said brightly, “Is this where you show us all around the campus?”

“Campus-schmampus,” Zane grinned, leaning close and lowering his voice. “How would you all like to see something *really* amazing?”

“I already don’t like the sound of this,” Ralph muttered.

Scorpius raised one eyebrow. “What are you suggesting, Walker?”

“Oh nothing,” Zane shrugged theatrically. “Except that maybe the Chancellor was in such a good mood that he forgot to lock up when he left, thanks in part to my reminding him about classes at just the right moment.”

“You wonderful cad!” Rose squeaked, scooting close to Zane and throwing an arm around his shoulders. “What are you planning?”

“Professor Jackson is a curious old fellow,” Zane said, adopting a serious tone. “He talks a big talk about the risks, and yet he plans for the most dangerous and amazing things of all.” He leaned in again, inviting the others into a huddle. “There’s a desk back there, in that conveniently unlocked office, with *dozens more rings*, all plotted to all sorts of locations everywhere! I say we use them! I say we visit someplace *really* cool!”

“That’s insane!” Ralph rasped. “You heard what Jackson said! It sounded like if we try to go too far we’ll stretch ourselves away to nothing!”

“Fiddlesticks,” Zane said dismissively, mimicking Franklyn. “If he really thought it was dangerous he wouldn’t have made all those rings. Besides, I’m not suggesting we go all that far away. Just a *teensy* way. A hop, skip and a jump, really.”

“You’re daft,” James said, but he was grinning. He couldn’t help it.

“You’ll want to go,” Zane insisted. “Trust me.”

“It’s suicidally reckless,” Scorpius said matter-of-factly.

Zane straightened and looked at each face in turn. “It’s New Amsterdam.”

Rose nodded seriously. “How soon can we go?”

Zane clapped her on the shoulder. “Let me get my blazer.”



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4. THE COLLECTOR

Less than a minute later, Zane led the group back through the dark antechamber, with its single table and collection of rings, and up a short wooden staircase to a second narrow door. This he opened carefully. As he did so, a creak emanated from the outer laboratory. Zane froze and glanced back nervously.

“What?” James asked. “Is Franklyn coming back?”

“Shh!” Zane hissed, and then added in a lower voice, “It’s not Franklyn I’m worried about. It’s Jackson. If he catches us messing around with his rings, being stretched to oblivion will be the least of our worries.

A shadow moved in the outer room, and then a figure appeared in the doorway.

“Am I late?” a girl’s voice asked in an excited whisper. “Oh good. I’m not late.”

Zane exhaled in relief. “You all know Nastasia. I told her we might be going on a little field trip.”

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James frowned as Nastasia crowded next to him, her hair now transformed to a glossy pink. “You think it’s a good idea to take this many people?”

“We’ll be fine,” Zane answered easily, stepping up into the tiny office. “Jackson made six copies of every set of rings. There are six of us. It’s perfect.”

“Besides,” Nastasia smiled, sidling up next to James at the base of the steps. “If you leave me behind, I will *totally* rat you all out.”

“Nice,” Scorpius nodded, not unappreciatively.

Rose trotted up the steps and glanced back from the office doorway. “Come on, you lot,” she grinned. “In for a Drummel, in for a Jack!”

Careful not to touch anything, James crowded into the dark office with the others. The room was extremely small, crammed with a desk, a very full bookshelf, and a tall wooden cabinet lined with narrow drawers. Zane counted down from the top, then slid open the eighth drawer. A collection of folded purple cloths lay neatly inside, each labelled with a pinned note. James leaned close, reading the labels.

“These are insane,” Ralph muttered, impressed. “They cover the whole magical world! Here’s the pyramids of Egypt! And Loch Ness! And what’s this one? ‘The Ring of the Bearded Ancients?’”

“Ooo!” Rose said in awe, shoving Ralph aside with some effort. “That’s the Pakistani wizarding university! *Very* secret and ancient! They say it’s hidden up in the Karakoram Mountains, surrounded by impossible peaks! Let’s go there instead!”

“Don’t be daft,” James insisted. “It’s too far. I don’t fancy getting pulled into a thread and snapped in two. You were all excited about New Amsterdam a minute ago.”

“That was before I knew all the options,” Rose pouted.

“Make with the rings, Zane, you Zombie goombah!” Nastasia urged eagerly. “James here is itching to go!”

James glanced aside at her in annoyance. If anything, he was having serious second thoughts about the entire venture. Nastasia, however, seemed to enjoy antagonizing him. She glanced at him, shoulder to shoulder, and winked mischievously.

“Here we are,” Zane announced, lifting one of the cloth bundles out of the drawer. “‘The Crystal Mountain, government level’. That’s the topmost floors of the huge glass skyscraper we saw last year,

remember? Oh, this is going to be totally excellent.” Very gingerly, he laid the cloth on the desk and unwrapped it, careful to map exactly how it had been folded. A moment later, twelve rings gleamed against the darkness.

“A pair each,” Scorpius said in a business-like manner, reaching for a set of rings. “Just like before.”

“This is it, everyone,” Zane warned. “Gold for outgoing, green for coming back. Keep your rings stashed safe in a pocket whenever you aren’t using them. If everything goes as planned, we’ll be back before the next bell and nobody will suspect a thing.”

Ralph moaned, “Since when does everything go as planned?”

“We should all be in agreement,” Rose announced, setting her face sternly and glancing around. “If anyone wants to stay back, we *all* stay back. Agreed?”

“Hmmm...” Nastasia cocked her head thoughtfully. She glanced aside at James and narrowed her eyes. “Mmmm... No.” With that, she jammed the golden ring onto her finger and vanished in a blur of speed.

“I must admit,” Scorpius announced abruptly, “I do sort of like her.” He twisted his own ring onto his finger and vanished as well.

“Eeee!” Rose cried, bouncing on her toes with equal parts excitement and fear. She donned her own ring, vanishing along with Zane, who left a thrilled whoop echoing behind him.

James gave a perplexed shrug. “What say, Ralph? On three?”

Ralph nodded stiffly. Together they counted off, rings poised before their fingers. On three, they jammed the rings on.

This time, the sensation of stretching was much greater. For a split second, James felt that his body was a mere ribbon, many miles long, funnelling through a conduit of light and colour. Then, more violently than before, reality snapped up around him, nearly smacking him in the face. He stumbled and fell heavily, sprawling onto some plush, flat surface.

“Oooh,” he moaned, trying to push himself upright. He opened his eyes and found himself staring down through a diminishing blur of glassy layers, vanishing into bright, dizzying depths. “Oh!” he exclaimed again, scrambling to his knees in alarm.

“Yeeks!” Ralph agreed from nearby. James glanced up and saw his friend huddled a few feet away, leaning against a gleaming, transparent desk. They appeared to be in a sort of enormous office complex, filled

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with desks, low walls, collections of plush chairs and long tables. It was not unlike some areas of the Ministry of Magic, except for the fact that everything, right down to the plush carpeting and high panelled ceiling, seemed to be made out of perfectly transparent materials. Every surface glimmered with captured prisms, dancing in the sunlight that filtered, uninterrupted, throughout the entire building. Spreading below, and visible from every angle, was the stacked twin cities of New Amsterdam and Manhattan, looking serene and eerily empty in the distance.

“The Crystal Mountain,” James said, smiling in amazement.

“Freaky,” Ralph commented, getting gingerly to his feet. “Nothing like living with constant, crushing vertigo. Where’s everybody else, by the way?”

As if in answer, a voice boomed through the air, echoing broadly. “All late arrivals should make their way to the elevators,” it announced sternly, interrupted by a distant, girlish giggle. The voice went on, somewhat off-microphone, “Shut up, Nastasia! You’re ruining the effect!”

James and Ralph glanced at each other. “Zane,” they said in unison.

The public address system shut off with a loud click.

“Over there,” James grinned, pointing toward a bank of glassy lift doors refracted through the crystal desks and a collection of tasteful, nearly invisible potted ferns. Together they began to make their way through the complex, barely avoiding barking their shins on the corners of transparent desks and chairs.

Despite the beauty of the place, a thin layer of dust fogged the crystal surfaces, reminding them of its months of abandoned emptiness. Glassy mugs still sat on desks, half full of congealed coffee and tea. At the head of a long conference table, a Magical Marker scribbled notes on a floating crystal screen, repeating the same charts over and over, squeaking drily in the silence.

James shivered despite the sunny warmth of the place.

Ralph reached the lifts first and tapped the up button. Distant machinery began to hum. Glancing down, James could see a tiny glimmering box between his feet. Swiftly, it began to climb, resolving into the unmistakable shape of a lift compartment. It swept smoothly into place behind the closed glass doors and shuddered to a stop. The doors shuttled open and both boys stepped inside, their feet making no noise on the strangely invisible plush carpeting.

James peered at the glowing buttons next to the door. The top button was larger than the rest, labelled ROOF MEZZANINE. With a shrug, James tapped it.

Immediately the lift began to rise. Beyond the doors, floors began to shuttle downward, revealing more levels of offices and meeting rooms. In a matter of seconds, the last floor swept below them and the lift came to a halt. James could see Zane, Rose, Scorpius and Nastasia gathered outside, but the rest of the exterior space was a glare of sunlight on crystal.

As the doors swept open, a gust of hot wind barged into the lift, ruffling James' hair and tee shirt.

"Looks like there's a bit of a scattering effect over distances," Zane called over the wind. "Good thing none of us materialized between floors."

Nastasia nodded. "Or inside an elevator shaft."

Ralph blinked and shuddered. "I hate knowing that the only thing between us and falling two hundred floors was dumb luck."

"I wouldn't be too worried, Deedle," Scorpius said encouragingly. "Dumb luck seems to have a thing for you lot."

James and Ralph joined the others as they strode toward a low railing. Sets of stairs led down from either side to the main roof, which was divided into a series of low, square platforms.

"Landing pads," Zane said, pointing. "For people who commute by broom. Look, there're still a few brooms parked over there on the rack."

James squinted against the sunlight. Sure enough, a series of neat racks stood along the roofline, still decked with a scattering of sleek, black brooms. Each broom seemed to have an unusual shape perched on its handle. James thought they looked like miniature gargoyles.

"Come on!" Zane called, trotting down the stairs to the main roof. "Let's take a look over the side!"

Rose and Nastasia followed eagerly, looking around with open curiosity. Feeling strangely reluctant, James descended the stairs as well.

"Blimey," Ralph said in a low voice as he reached the ledge of the roofline. "That's a lot of height."

James peered over carefully. The four lane avenue appeared to be miles below, separated from them by a haze of distance. Wind tore over

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the roof, rattling the brooms in the rack and whipping through the students' hair.

"It's excellent," Nastasia proclaimed, leaning over the ledge and tilting her head up toward the sky, her eyes closed and her pink hair fluttering.

"Brrr!" Rose said, hugging herself. "It gives me the shivers!" She stepped back behind Zane and clutched her cardigan tightly about her shoulders.

"My father says Victor Krum and the Harriers are down there somewhere," Scorpius muttered, frowning into the distance. "The official story is that they're helping find stragglers, but my father thinks there are other reasons. He thinks they're here to keep an eye on headmaster Merlin's staff."

"His staff?" Rose blinked. "You mean it's still down there?"

Scorpius nodded, still peering down into the city below. "He jammed it into the street when he cast the spell that froze the Muggles for a day. It was the spell that used up all his power, killing him. But his staff has been stuck there ever since. Nobody can get it out, and it's too powerful just to leave unguarded."

"Like the sword in the stone," Ralph sighed, and then shuddered.

James glanced at his friend and saw the frown on his face. Last time they had been here, Ralph had been carrying the dead body of poor Lucy, killed in the World Between the Worlds. A deep sense of melancholy descended on him at the thought.

"Come on," he said flatly. "Let's get out of here."

To his surprise, there were nods all around. Slowly and silently, the troop began to make their way back to the mezzanine.

As they reached the top of the steps, a particularly hard gust of wind howled over the rooftop, flapping James' tee shirt against his chest and streaming wildly through Rose's long hair. The cardigan she had clutched around her shoulders caught the wind like a sail and tore up into the air.

"No!" she cried, grasping at it, but it was already gone. The cardigan lofted gently into the sky, borne on the currents of the wind, and then dropped, fluttering silently past the roofline and down, down, out of sight.

"No!" Rose cried again, "Bloody hell! No!"

“Bummer,” Zane announced with feeling. “That was a nice sweater, too.”

Rose spun on the spot and boggled at him, her eyes wild, her hair still streaming in the wind. “It isn’t the sweater, you great idiot!” She screamed, and then clutched her face in her hands, turning back toward the empty space beyond the roof. “Oh, how could I have been so bloody stupid?”

“What is it, Rose?” James asked, approaching her. “What’s the problem?”

“The ring!” she said, facing him and holding up her left hand, showing him the golden ring on her finger. “The green ring for the return trip! It was in my cardigan pocket, James! It’s gone now, blown right over the roof, and I’m stuck here!”

There was a long moment of silence as everyone stared at Rose, dumbfounded and horror-struck.

Nastasia stepped back toward the top of the stairs and peered over the railing, into the distant haze of the cities below.

“Whoopsie!” she sang out, glancing back with an ironic smile.



The six students approached the railing over which Rose’s cardigan had blown.

Ralph frowned thoughtfully. “Can’t the rest of us just return and then send somebody back with two green rings?”

“They don’t work that way,” Zane shook his head. “They’re made in pairs. The green rings only work with their golden counterparts. Separated, they’re just jewellery.”

James squinted over the ledge, seeking any sign of Rose’s lost cardigan. “At least no one else can use her green ring if they find her sweater, right?”

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“Right,” Zane agreed. “But if we don’t find it, Rose is going to have to walk home. And it’s a hell of a long way to the Aleron on foot.”

“This is all *her* fault,” James said suddenly, turning and glaring at Nastasia. “She took off before we all agreed to come. She’ll probably pop straight back without another thought.”

A sincerely hurt look crossed Nastasia’s face. James was so surprised to see it that he felt rather bad about blaming her. The look, however, was gone almost as soon as it had appeared.

“I didn’t make anyone come along,” she proclaimed loftily. “I’m the adventurous type. I can’t help it.”

Ralph turned to Rose with a pained expression. “Why couldn’t you just keep your ring in your pocket like everyone else?”

“That cardigan contained the only pockets I have!” she hissed. “You try running around in a skirt and see where you stick things!”

“Yeah!” Zane said with sudden enthusiasm.

“This is all very entertaining,” Scorpius interjected, “but the clock is ticking and we aren’t any closer to finding Rose’s ring. Might I suggest we head down and form a search party?”

James sighed. “Right. There’s no point in bickering. I’ll stay with Rose to help her find her ring. The rest of you can head back if you want.”

“No way,” Ralph said immediately. “We stick together. Rose was right. We’re all in this together.”

“I’m not going anywhere without Rosie,” Zane agreed. “This was my idea, after all.”

Scorpius nodded curtly, and then turned to Nastasia.

“Oh, what fun would it be if I left now?” she announced in a suddenly sulky voice. James was secretly gratified to see that she was capable of being disgruntled.

“Fine,” Scorpius said, turning toward the mezzanine and the elevators beyond. “Down we go.”

Zane shook his head. “The elevators are no good. The street level is all locked up inside and out. The magical security perimeter was set up by Professor Jackson himself. There’s no way out through the building.”

“So what are we going to do?” Ralph shrugged helplessly. “Jump?”

“No,” James said, turning toward the further roofline and pointing. “We fly!”

Rose approached the few dark broomsticks that remained in the rooftop rack. “But that would be like stealing. Wouldn’t it?”

“Nooo,” Zane assured her heartily. “No, it’s called ‘commandeering.’ This is an emergency after all. We can return them when we’re done.”

Rose glanced aside at him suspiciously. “You *like* the idea of flying those brooms over the ledge, don’t you?”

“Don’t be silly,” Zane replied unconvincingly. “Tough times call for tough measures and all that. It’s a dirty job. Damn the torpedoes. Ooo! This one’s an Aventidore! Got its own slipstream generator and everything!”

“Zane!” Rose scolded. “This is very serious!”

“Right,” Zane agreed, not taking his eyes from the broom. “Very serious. Totally. But still. This one’s mine.”

James peered closely at the broom, noticing again the impish shape perched on the end. “What’s that thing, anyway?”

Zane shrugged. “I don’t know. Hood ornament, maybe?” He reached for it, grabbing the sleek black broom from its rack just as Scorpius called out a sudden warning. His words were drowned out by an ear-splitting shriek from the broom itself.

“THIEF!” the broom blared in a shrill falsetto voice. “THIEF! ANAUTHORIZED POSSESSION! WHOOP! WHOOP! CALL POLICE! NOTIFY OWNER! CONTACT INSURANCE AGENCY! WHOOP! WHOOP! WHOOP!”

“That’s a personal alarm gargyle!” Scorpius shouted over the wailing broom. He pointed at the impish shape perched on the end, which had cupped its tiny hands to the sides of its wide mouth. “What are you, a total bumpkin?”

“Ah,” Zane nodded, trying to sound casual while shouting over the blaring imp. “Nice feature! There’s got to be a way to shut it off somehow.”

He began to poke and prod at the imp, as if looking for a button. The imp slapped at his hand, then began to giggle angrily.

“Knock it off!” it demanded. “This is serious! I’m being stolen! THIEF! NOTIFY POLICE! WHOOP! WHEEOOO!”

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“We’re not thieves!” Rose cried, leaning close to the imp with her hands over her ears. “And your owner isn’t anywhere nearby! The whole city’s been evacuated! There’s no one here! No police, no anybody!”

The imp glared at her suspiciously. “**LIKELY STORY, LADY!**” it blared, its shrill voice echoing around the rooftop. “**THAT’S JUST WHAT YOU’D LIKE ME TO BELIEVE, ISN’T IT?**”

“We could prove it,” Nastasia conceded thoughtfully. “Just chuck it off the roof, Zane, and let it see for itself.”

“Now let’s not be hasty!” The imp admonished, raising both of its hands, palms out. “I’m just doin’ a job here, Pinkie! No need to damage the merchandise!”

“Look,” Scorpius said, addressing the imp. “We aren’t stealing you. We’re just borrowing you for a bit of an emergency. My father has one of you installed on his own broom, and I know for a fact that you’re especially hexed to assist in any and all emergencies. Then again,” he stood back and cocked his head thoughtfully. “Perhaps that’s just the Genie Five Hundred series.”

“The *Genie Five Hundred series!*?” the imp scoffed, crossing its arms haughtily. “That’s strictly aftermarket dwarf charm stuff! Not even real imp! *I’m* a two hundred Drummel factory option. Just try me, bucko.”

“I don’t know,” Zane said, concealing a half smile. “I bet you can’t even get us down from this roof.”

The imp rolled its bulbous yellow eyes. “Nice reverse psychology, Sigmund. **WHOO! WHOO! I’M BEING STOLEN BY AN IDIOT WITH NO IMAGINATION!**”

“Hold up!” Ralph called out, interrupting the imp as it drew another deep breath. “This really is an emergency. We’re stuck here unless we can all get down from this roof and find our only way back. You’re the only one that can help us, but you can’t fly us all down anyway. Can you turn off the alarm gargoyles on these other couple of brooms as well?”

The imp still had its chest inflated, prepared to continue whooping. In a strained voice, it asked, “You sure this is a real emergency?”

“Please,” Rose said seriously. “I’m stranded here if I can’t get down and find what I’ve lost. We’ll bring you right back here when we’re done.”

“If we can,” Nastasia added reasonably. The imp glared at her, apparently remembering her threat to toss it over the side. Finally, it exhaled harshly and shook its head.

“Fine,” it agreed reluctantly. “But I’m hexed with a photographic memory and I am going to report each and every one of you if things get hinky. Hey! The rest of you! Command over-ride yellow: riders in need of assistance.”

The other two remaining brooms each emitted a sort of squawking bleat. Theimps crouched on the handles stirred to life and eyed the students with a mixture of suspicion and eagerness. One of them was lithe and silvery blue with a tiny wedge-shaped head and glowing, pupil-less eyes. The other was very fat, pink, and adorned with a pair of fluffy white wings.

“Oooh,” the pink one said in a bubbly voice, “A real emergency! Shall I locate the nearest florist?”

“Cupid series,” the first imp muttered under its breath. “Great.”

“Yay!” the Cupid clapped its chubby hands. “An adventure!”

Zane held up the Aventidore. “Dibs on this one!” To Rose, he muttered, “Say shotgun.”

“Shotgun!” Rose proclaimed immediately, sidling up next to him.

James glared at her, not entirely sure what that meant but knowing it would probably result in him flying the Cupid broom. He glanced aside and saw Scorpius snatch the blue broom from the rack. Its silvery imp coiled lithely on the end.

“I’m with Scorpius,” Ralph said sheepishly, glancing back at the pink broom. “I don’t think that thing could hold me up anyway.”

Nastasia grinned and took her place next to James. “You want me to drive?” she asked sweetly, glancing up at him and batting her eyes.

James sighed and shook his head. He reached for the Cupid broom. Like the others, it was mostly black, although it bore neat pink pinstripes down both sides and had dried roses threaded into its tail.

“You two look simply adorable,” the Cupid insisted as James reluctantly mounted the broom and Nastasia threw her arms around his shoulders. “And just look!” it went on, pointing at Nastasia’s hair. “We match! How perfectly scrumptious!”

“Yeah,” Nastasia grinned, her voice very loud in James’ ear. “It’s scrumptious, isn’t it, James?”

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James felt his face heat with a confused rush of embarrassment, fear, and a few other emotions he couldn't immediately identify.

"Wind's blowing that way," Zane announced, pointing out over the length of the avenue below. "Let's follow it and keep a sharp eye out. Rose's sweater must have fallen down there in the street somewhere. Let's get low enough to search for it. Got it, Impy?"

"Don't push it," the Aventidore imp growled in resignation.

James clutched his broom. "Let's go! Everybody stay together."

"I'll look up starting times for any good shows at the Moxy Mage!" The Cupid cried in an inspired voice.

With that, the three brooms, each weighed down with two riders, kicked off from the roof and lofted out into the whickering wind over dizzying heights. Immediately, they angled down and began a slaloming descent into the shadows of the skyscrapers.

"You're drifting right!" Nastasia barked in James' ear, renewing her grip on his shoulders. "And you're dropping too fast! Where'd you learn to fly?"

"Just shut it, I'm trying to concentrate," James called tersely. "And do you have to hold on so hard? You're going to squeeze my head off."

"You fly better and maybe I'll loosen up. Look out!"

James swerved to the left as a flagpole swept past, jutting from the side of a nearby skyscraper.

Nastasia nearly climbed onto his shoulders as he sped up. "There's a whole row of them!" she squealed. "Not so close! What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for Rose's cardigan, you big git! It might be hung up on anything! Get off me! I can hardly see!"

"Lover's quarrel," the Cupid chided with a cluck of its tongue. "I could arrange an appointment for his and hers pedicures? How romantic would that be? Answer: very!"

"Shut up!" both James and Nastasia commanded simultaneously.

The three brooms continued to drift downward, seesawing back and forth between canyons of glass and steel.

In the lead, Zane called back, "Anybody see anything?"

"We have to get lower still," Scorpius announced, shaking his head in frustration. "It could have blown anywhere: under any of those abandoned cars, or on top of an awning, anything."

“Blast it all,” Rose cursed to herself. “If only I could just perform an *Accio* spell!”

Ralph brightened. “That’s a great idea! Why don’t you do it?”

Rose glanced back at him as if he was a total idiot. “Because my wand is *also* in the pocket of my cardigan!”

“And none of us knows it well enough to summon it ourselves,” Scorpius sighed. “There’s nothing for it but to keep--”

“What’s that?” Nastasia interrupted, stabbing out an arm and pointing toward a nearby roof. James glanced to the right, following her gesture. The roof was sliding past, rising as they descended. Something was moving through the collection of old air conditioning units and snaking ducts. With a stumbling lunge, it leapt out into the sunlight.

“It’s a woman!” Rose cried, shaking Zane’s shoulders atop their broom. “What’s she doing here?”

It was indeed a woman. Her dirty blonde hair was stringy, whipped by the wind so that it formed a wild stew around her head and her haunted, bright eyes. James knew instinctively that she was a Muggle, and yet when she saw them-- six young people flying along on brooms three hundred feet over the avenue-- she did not so much as blink. She lurched toward them, her shoes slipping frantically on the tar-paper roof.

“Help,” she gasped hoarsely. There was movement behind her now. Dark shapes flitted through the rooftop vents, angling swiftly toward her. James barely had time to see them before his broom descended below the line of the roof, obscuring his view.

As James swept past, the woman glanced back at her pursuers. She moaned in terror, and then, to James’ complete shock, she leapt.

“No!” Rose cried.

But the woman was not jumping to her death. She had aimed for James’ broom. Flailing desperately, she tackled both him and Nastasia, one arm around each of their necks, clinging desperately. The broom slewed sickeningly to the left, nearly turning over completely, and began to drop in a steep spiral.

“Too heavy!” the Cupid wailed. “Exceeding weight limit by forty percent! No love triangles!”

“Grab her!” James shouted, struggling to regain control of the broom as its descent steepened.

“Are you crazy?!” Nastasia shrieked into the rushing wind. “We can’t hold her up!”

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“Well we can’t throw her off!”

“We’ll crash if we don’t!” Nastasia, James realized, was trying to pry the woman’s arm from around her neck. The woman moaned, seemingly too weak to hold on much longer anyway.

“Nastasia!” James cried. “Stop! Hold onto her! We’ll make it!”

A shape swooped past them, buffeting them with its passage. James glanced hectically aside and saw Zane struggling to match their descent. Behind him, Rose hung on for dear life, her lips pressed into a thin line of terror.

Zane pointed downward and hollered something.

“What!?” James cried, struggling futilely to hold the broomstick upright.

Zane leaned aside and called out again, “Aim for the awnings!”

James boggled at him, and then turned his attention to the avenue that was roaring up beneath him. A broad green awning spanned the building on his left side. James nodded understanding and lunged hard left, dragging the failing broom with him.

“Hold on!” he cried. The awning swept up beneath them, tilting and yawing as James completely lost control. He braced himself and closed his eyes.

The impact was much harder than he expected. The taut canvas was shockingly stiff, but the framework beneath broke away with a screech of startled metal. The awning collapsed beneath them, taking them with it as it crashed down, half onto the sidewalk and half onto an abandoned yellow taxi.

James bounced off, losing his grip on the broom and ricocheting off the door of the cab. He struck the pavement hard enough to rattle his teeth and for a few seconds his vision went swimmy.

Shadows passed over him as the others swooped down to land nearby.

“James!” Rose called anxiously. “Are you all right? Tell me you’re all right!”

“I’m fine,” James said mushily, forcing himself to a sitting position in the shadow of the taxi. “I think. What about the others?”

He looked around, fearing the worst. Nastasia was tangled in the remains of the awning, which seemed to have folded around her in a sort of green canvas cocoon. She moaned irritably and began to struggle out of the wreckage. The mysterious blonde woman had fallen onto the taxi

and rolled down onto its bonnet, where she stirred limply. Miraculously, she seemed to be physically all right, if near exhaustion. She slid off the bonnet and her knees buckled.

“Run,” she muttered tensely. “Go, Lissa. Don’t let him collect you. Run, babe, run!”

But her legs rebelled, refusing to hold her up. They jiggled beneath her and she sprawled pathetically to the sidewalk.

“Is she all right?” Zane asked, ditching his broom and running to her side.

“Who is she?” Ralph added, dropping to his knees next to her.

Rose joined them. Together, the three students helped her into a sitting position. “Miss?” Rose asked her carefully. “Is that your name? Lissa? What are you doing here?”

“Have to run,” the woman, Lissa, insisted dully. She glanced around, saw Rose and Ralph, and suddenly her eyes sharpened. She grabbed at them. “Have to run!” she repeated frantically. “The Collector is coming!”

“The who?” James said, climbing awkwardly to his feet.

“The Collector,” a deep voice announced from behind him.

James startled and spun around, nearly unhinging his knees again. A figure was standing against the lowering sun, casting James in its shadow. It was a man, very tall, wearing a heavy burgundy robe with gold scrollwork on the sleeves. A deep hood concealed his face, revealing only his chin and the tip of his nose. He seemed to stare at James from the depths of the hood, as if weighing him.

“I apologize,” he said, smiling suddenly. He raised his pale hands and pushed back the hood, revealing a handsome, if unremarkable face. Dark hair, threaded with steely grey, was combed back from the temples. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I am the person she is referring to, the Collector, although it is not so much a name as a sort of... title.”

“What do you want?” Rose called out, putting her arm protectively around Lissa, who had begun to hyperventilate in apparent terror. “Why are you chasing her?”

“This poor creature is one of my charges,” the man answered, a hint of sadness in his voice. “Just one of the unfortunate, forgotten people left to fend for themselves in this ghost of a city. I have taken it upon myself to care for them, whenever my duties allow it.”

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“If you are caring for her,” Scorpius asked, taking a step forward. “Then why was she running from you? Why did she nearly kill herself trying to get away from you?”

“Alas,” the Collector said, moving carefully closer to Lissa and descending to one knee. “She is not in her right mind. Few of them are. This is why they were left here to begin with, why they did not heed the warnings to evacuate along with the others. She is confused. And as you can see, she is a danger to herself. I will take her back. I will care for her, as I do the rest.”

Lissa suddenly laughed. It was a ragged, desperate sound. “The rest!” she gasped. “There are hardly any of us left at all! You’ve ‘collected’ so many! You’re a monster! A... a *beast!*”

The Collector bowed his head and spread his hands. “Unfortunately, some delusions are much more stubborn than others. I do what I can to help them, but some... require special attention.” He raised his head again and spoke directly to the woman. “Come along, my dear Melissa. You know there is no way out of the quarantine zone now, not unless you wish to get arrested by the authorities. They would imprison you. Your many crimes...”

Lissa laughed again, a wild, animal cackle. “Imprisonment! Yes! Let them take me! I’ll go willingly!” She giggled, and the giggle was half sob, as if the Collector was teasing her with a wonderful treat rather than a threat of capture. A shiver rippled down James’ back.

“She doesn’t want to go with you,” he said, moving to get between the Collector and Lissa. “She can come with us. We can look after her. You’ve... done your bit.”

The Collector glanced up at him without raising his head. His eyes were cold, his smile a mere mask.

“How generous you are... James Potter,” he said.

James took a step backward and reached for his wand. Narrowing his eyes, he asked, “How do you know who I am?”

“Come, Lissa,” The Collector said again, extending his pale hand. “You don’t want to involve these nice young people in your troubles. Do you?”

The threat was obvious. James glanced back at Lissa, saw the frozen fear on her face. If she didn’t go along with this man, her fate-- whatever it was-- would be extended to those helping her. Slowly,

haltingly, she disengaged herself from Rose, Ralph and Zane. She began to stand.

“I don’t think so,” Scorpius said impatiently, raising his fist. His wand protruded from it, levelled at the Collector. “I have nothing against you, friend, but personally, I’m weary of veiled threats. Believe me, I know them when I hear them. The woman stays with us.”

The Collector looked at Scorpius’ wand, his eyebrows raised slightly. “Is this how all of you feel?” he asked, a tinge of disappointment in his voice.

James raised his own wand and moved alongside Scorpius. He nodded resolutely. A moment later, he felt Ralph and Zane on either side, their own wands levelled.

“Really, James?” The Collector said, ignoring the others. “This is the stand you wish to take? Risking all for the sake of a sad, wasted Muggle woman? A woman even her own kind cannot deign to be bothered with?”

James swallowed hard and nodded, renewing his grip on his wand.

“You really should consider,” the Collector said, rising again to his full height, “choosing your battles *more wisely*.”

He raised his arms, showing them the white palms of his hands, as if he was about to perform a magic trick. And then, furthering this image, black smoke began to pour out of his dangling sleeves. The smoke swirled, condensing into tendrils, and then collapsing horribly into shapes. Two creatures formed out of the smoke, both taller than the Collector himself, and both equally terrible.

“You will not yet have learned of the Wendigo,” the Collector said calmly. “It is native to this country, ancient and starved nearly to extinction. Until, that is, a certain Warlock associate of mine revived them. They are cannibal spirits. And as you can see... they are *hungry*.”

The Wendigos looked like horribly emaciated humans, with mottled grey skin stretched taut over their bones. Their feet were grotesquely elongated, raised at the heels like wolves’. Long, spindly arms dangled to the ground, ending in spider-like fingers. The worst part, however, were their heads: oversized, hunched forward between their shoulders, with deep, wide-set eyes as white as marbles and thin, bloody lips peeled back from their teeth. Ragged antlers sprouted from their temples, sharp and ridged with serrations.

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The Wendigoes raised their long fingers, hooked into talons, and coiled to pounce.

“Run!” James called, levelling his wand at the monster on the right. He shot it with a stunning spell, but the jet of magic merely exploded from its nearly translucent skin. It launched itself at him, unleashing its rancid breath in a low roar.

James ducked sideways, throwing himself under the collapsed awning. The Wendigo landed atop it with a screech of metal and immediately began tearing at it. The other roared viciously. James heard its thumping footsteps as it galloped past in pursuit of the others. Someone screamed. Spells were fired, illuminating the street. A whoosh of air told James that at least one of the brooms was airborne again. He scrambled out on the other side of the broken awning and began to run.

Scorpius, Rose and Lissa were crammed onto one of the brooms, but they were too heavy to get any lift. The second Wendigo pounced after them, leaping over abandoned cars and snarling hoarsely.

A heavy thump struck the ground behind James, accompanied by a gust of stinking breath. He knew the first Wendigo was right behind him, sensed its long arms lunging toward him.

He ducked to the left and leapt through a broken shop window. Mannequins toppled before him, skating away on pebbles of broken glass. He tumbled over them, scrambled up and threw himself into the darkened store. Behind him, the Wendigo roared, smashing through the remains of the window and dashing aside the mannequins effortlessly. James glanced back, saw its milky eyes glowing faintly in the dimness. It saw him and pounced.

Down James crouched, ducking under a rack of clothing. The Wendigo crashed into it, knocking it sideways, but James scrambled out the other side and hurled himself through a rear door. Darkness met him, crowded with boxes and more mannequins. Shelves stood in rows, cluttered with merchandise. The only light came from a tiny window in the back, set into a grey metal door. James made toward it, dodging frantically around the shelves.

Behind him, the storeroom door burst from its hinges. The Wendigo hefted it in its spindly arms and threw it at James like a discus. The door whooshed over his shoulder and crashed against a shelving unit, sending boxes flying in all directions.

Gasping with terror, James reached the rear door. It was equipped with a push-bar, which James slammed downward with both hands. Thankfully, the door heaved open before him, dumping him out into a narrow alley, choked with trash bins and wooden pallets.

James ran, threading through the trash bins. Distantly, he heard screams, crashes, the fizzing whoosh of magic.

The Wendigo exploded through the rear door, blasting it off its hinges and sending it crashing against the brick wall opposite. The Wendigo saw James and dropped to all fours. With a scrape of gravel, it launched itself after him, galloping between the trash bins with horrible speed. It was nearly upon him. With a deep, grating snarl, it leapt.

James threw himself to the broken pavement and covered his head.

A shadow flicked over him, accompanied by a strange metallic noise: *FPANG!* A split second later, a heavy, ringing crash filled the air.

James looked up in time to see the Wendigo hurled, upside down, against a chain-link fence that divided the alley. The fence bowed under its weight, and then recoiled, flinging the horrible creature against a stack of pallets.

“Stay! Where! You! Are!” a deep voice commanded sternly.

James craned to look back over his shoulder. A man in a heavy green tunic, studded with black leather armour, hovered over the alley on a nasty-looking black broom. His arm was fully extended as he sighted down his wand, pointing it at the Wendigo.

The Wendigo scrambled to its feet, apparently unfazed by its encounter with the fence. It saw the man on the broom and snarled, wrinkling its bloody lips from its black gums. Then, with a lithe speed that was terrible to watch, it lunged for the nearest trash bin. James thought it meant to hide. Instead, the thing heaved the enormous bin into the air, hurling it like a projectile.

The man on the broom fainted left instantly, just enough to allow the trash bin to whistle past, crashing against the wall behind him. He fired a green spell, briefly illuminating the dim alley and producing another strange metallic *FPANG!* The spell struck the Wendigo squarely in the chest, knocking it backwards with incredible force. The Wendigo hit the brick wall and smashed completely through it, creating a jagged hole into darkness.

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“Come!” the man on the broom commanded, lowering a large gloved hand to James. “They can’t be killed, only repulsed! Hurry, before it revives itself!”

James glanced from the broken brick wall to the man on the broom. This was obviously one of the Harriers that Scorpius had mentioned. Without a second thought, he reached up, grasped the man’s forearm, and felt himself pulled bodily off the ground and onto the broom.

“Hold on!” the Harrier barked hoarsely, turning swiftly in the narrow confines of the alley.

Behind them, the Wendigo roared. There was a crash of bricks.

The green-clad Harrier hunched over his broom and it rocketed forward, more swiftly and powerfully than anything James had ever experienced. He scrambled for a hand-hold, grasped two fists full of the man’s short cape, and held on as tightly as he could. The force of acceleration was breath-taking. An instant later, the broom sped out into sunlight, leaving the alley behind.

“My friends!” James called over the rush of the wind. “There’s another of those things after them!”

The Harrier didn’t reply, but he banked hard to the right, soaring out over the avenue where the fight had begun. James saw the broken awning and the crooked taxi. The broom banked again as its pilot surveyed the scene, seeming to ascertain which direction the fight had gone from a thousand subtle clues. He tilted the broom upwards and accelerated again.

As they hurtled around a corner, James spied a flash of electric blue ahead. The Harrier ticked his broom straight toward it and raised his wand again.

“It’s them!” James called as they closed in.

Sure enough, Scorpius, Rose and Lissa were limping along on the blue broom, barely twenty feet above the street. Beneath them, the second Wendigo leapt onto a bus, coiled, and sprung at them, stretching out its incredibly long arms. It swiped, meaning to swat them straight out of the air, but another blue flash lit the street, emanating from an orb of magic that flickered around the broom, repelling the Wendigo’s grasp. It fell back to the street in a furious crouch and roared.

“That’s one tough little imp,” the Harrier exclaimed, gesturing with his wand as they circled the others. James squinted through the

roaring wind and saw the lithe little security gargoyle crouched alertly on the tip of the sinking broom. Its blue eyes glowed like pinpricks of lightning, casting the protective blue bubble. "It can't hold out much longer," the Harrier added, swooping to cut the Wendigo off from them. "We'll have to fend it off. Fortunately there's just the one. Ah, damn."

James saw it coming at the same time: the Wendigo's twin leapt into view at the end of the block. It saw the crippled broom and snarled viciously. In an instant, it began to leap from car-top to car-top, crimping the metal bonnets and roofs with its thudding footsteps.

"Wand out!" the Harrier ordered, levelling his own wand at the nearer of their pursuers. "Use a Convulsis spell if you know it! Anything with some force behind it! You take the further one!"

"Now?" James cried, fumbling his wand out and aiming it.

"NOW!"

Both of them fired at once. The nearer Wendigo thrashed backwards as a blue bolt struck it. James' Convulsis spell missed its mark, however, exploding a newspaper box behind the advancing monster. The Wendigo zigged back and forth, shattering windscreens and swinging from utility poles.

"Again!" the Harrier commanded.

More bolts of magic lit the street, with Scorpius joining in from behind, but it was little use. Even the Harrier's direct hits only repulsed the creatures for a moment. The twin monstrosities were nearly upon them, snarling more viciously than ever.

A series of pops suddenly echoed along the canyon of skyscrapers. Figures appeared in mid-swoop, each dressed in green tunics and matte black armour, each straddling their own long, sleek broomsticks. They arced around in tightening loops and finally halted in formation, forming a ring around the original Harrier and his charges. Nine Harriers in all, nine wands pointed down at the Wendigos, which had suddenly dropped to alert, furious crouches.

"On my mark!" one of the newcomers barked. James glanced up and was overjoyed to see Viktor Krum, his face set with grim determination. "FIRE!"

All nine Harriers unleashed their spells on the Wendigos simultaneously. Green bolts lit the street, converging on the creatures in an instant. That strange, metallic *FPANG!* sounded again, this time multiplied nearly ten-fold. There was an explosion of green light and a

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shockwave of thick, black smoke. When the echoes died away, the Wendigos were gone.

The Harrier sharing James' broom drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, purposely calming himself. He looked aside, assuring that everyone was all right, and then glanced up at Krum.

"About... bloody... *time!*" he shouted, his voice echoing along the empty street.



"What's the matter, Piotre?" one of the late arrivals called, "Can't handle a couple of escaped house-pets on your own?"

"James!" Krum shouted, piloting his broom into position next to him, his face deadly stern. "*What* are you doing here?"

James stammered. "We-- there were some rings... experimental magic..."

Krum shook his head vigorously. "On second thought, I don't care. Do you have a means to get back home?"

James nodded, then glanced aside as Rose and Scorpius lowered their overloaded broom, the Muggle woman crammed between them. "Er, sorta . And we're very keen to, actually. But Rose is missing her ring. It was in her cardigan when it, er, blew off the roof of the Crystal Mountain."

James turned back to Krum, expecting a stern or confused frown. Instead, Krum had produced a tiny notebook from a chest pocket on his leather armour. He was writing on it with an equally tiny quill, the implements looking slightly silly in his large, gloved hands. He nodded curtly at his own notes.

"Cardigan," he stated. "Colour?"

"Um," Rose spoke up sheepishly, "It's sort of a pale salmon colour? With perhaps a little mauve?"

Krum looked at her without writing anything, his brow lowered.

“Pink,” James interjected. “It’s pink. Do you think you can help us?”

“The cardigan contains a ring,” Krum confirmed, frowning again at his notes. “Anything else?”

“My wand,” Rose called. “And, er, some Droobles gum. And possibly a Nosebleed nougat or two--”

“That will do,” Krum announced crisply, pocketing his notebook and tiny quill. He raised his voice and called out, “Search pattern Sigma! Object is a pink cardigan sweater, lost from the roof of the Crystal Mountain. Consider prevailing winds and be aware of high perches and overhangs. Upon retrieval, assure contents: one ring, one wand, assorted effects. Teams one through three, go now and report back in a quarter hour. Team four, return to watch perimeter. This may have been a distraction.” The last he added in a worried growl, turning back to James.

“It was very foolish of you to come here, James,” he said gravely, and it pained James to hear the disappointment in the older man’s voice.

“We weren’t supposed to come *here*, exactly,” James insisted weakly. “We started out in the top floors of the Crystal Mountain. It was just a quick out-and-back, using these magical rings Zane and his mates have been working on.”

Krum’s eyes sharpened. “Zane Walker? He is here as well?”

James nodded nervously. “Yeah. Somewhere. He and a girl named Nastasia,” a wave of worry suddenly washed over him as he glanced around the deserted street. “And Ralph, too! Where are they? That Collector bloke must have them!”

Even as James spoke, a clatter echoed from the nearby corner and a trio of figures clambered into view. James glanced toward the sound and was astounded to see Zane, Nastasia and Ralph climbing around the wreck of a bus.

Piotre, the Harrier with whom James still shared a broom, said, “Are these your friends?”

“That’s them,” James nodded, squirming to climb off the broom. The Harrier lowered his broom, allowing James to jump down.

“James!” Zane called, “What happened to the Wendigoes? And who are your new pals? On second thought,” he frowned a little, “I guess both those questions sorta answer each other. Oh! Hi, Viktor!”

“I should have known you were part of this, Walker,” Viktor sighed.

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James met his friends near the wrecked bus. “What...?” he stammered, looking them up and down. They appeared to barely have broken a sweat. “How did you...?”

“How did we avoid becoming lunch for a pair of anorexic zombie cannibals?” Zane clarified, raising his eyebrows. “Good question. It’s a tale of true grit and resourcefulness if there ever was one. See, as soon as we saw Scorpius and Rose fly off with the Muggle woman...”

“I just put on my green ring,” Nastasia piped up, lifting a hand and wriggling her fingers. “Badda-boom. Built-in escape route.”

“Ralph and I followed along,” Zane shrugged. “It seemed like the obvious thing to do. Then, we zapped right back again. Only when we came back, the rings landed us back on top of the Crystal Mountain. It took us a few minutes to get back down from there. Fortunately, I was genius enough to grab these from the X-Comm lab.” He held up a pair of old but serviceable brooms.

Rose and Scorpius joined them, bringing Lissa with them.

James frowned at Zane. “You mean, you three just... left?”

“We thought you would do the same,” Ralph said. “There was no fighting those Wendigo things. At least, not without... er, professional help.” He eyed Viktor and Piotre, who hung in mid-air nearby, talking in serious voices on their sleek brooms.

“But I--” James began, and then stopped. He had honestly forgotten about the ring in his pocket, the one that would have whisked him immediately to safety if he had merely put it on. In retrospect, it seemed very silly-- and potentially deadly-- for him to have forgotten about it. But then he remembered that Rose hadn’t had her ring at all, and neither had the Muggle woman, Lissa. He looked at Zane and Ralph, then Nastasia.

“*You,*” he said, realization dawning on him. “You were just waiting for a chance to zap back. You didn’t care about anyone else. If Zane and Ralph hadn’t seen you do it, they never would have thought to do it themselves. They never would have left Rose here.”

“Now hold on, James,” Zane interjected. “We came back immediately, *and* with help. We were going to use the brooms to get everyone up off the street, where those monsters couldn’t reach us.”

“*She* wasn’t thinking about anyone but *herself*,” James insisted, still glaring at Nastasia. “Neither of you would have left if you hadn’t

seen her do it first, just to save her own skin. I'm surprised you even got her to come back with you!"

Nastasia met his glare with a look of wounded surprise. Then, her face hardened. She turned away, but not before James saw tears shimmering in her eyes.

Suddenly, Zane did the last thing James expected. He shoved James, hard, on the shoulder. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "What were we supposed to do? You ran off! Scorpius and Rose made it into the air with Lissa! One of those things nearly ripped Nastasia's head off with one swipe! It was instinct to get to safety any way we could! If it wasn't for her quick thinking, the three of us would probably be dead right now!"

James stared at his friend in shock. He glanced at Ralph for support and saw a deeply wounded look on the big boy's face.

"I'm sorry James," Ralph said quietly. "You might be right. Perhaps we shouldn't have left. But we came back as soon as we could."

James suddenly felt like a complete cad. He shook his head. "No, Ralph. I-- I shouldn't have said..."

"Yeah, yeah," Zane said with uncharacteristic bitterness. "We're all sorry about everything. Can we just find Rose's cardigan and get the hell out of here already?"

He stepped past James, heading toward Viktor and Piotre.

"Really, Ralph," James said quietly. "I am sorry. You both did the smart thing. I was stupid to forget I had a way out in my pocket, and I almost got killed for it."

"Sure," Ralph said, smiling wanly. "But you're right. At least you didn't leave Rose here. You and Scorpius, you two are the heroes."

"Hah," James scoffed. "I barely got a shot off. I ran like a garden gnome and completely lost track of Rose and the others. If it hadn't been for Viktor and his harriers..." He shuddered, realizing how truly perilous his situation had been.

"It's all right," Rose said quietly, placing a hand on James' and Ralph's shoulders. "We all did the best we could. And everything turned out all right. Didn't it?"

Lissa suddenly gave a harsh, bitter laugh. "Everything's all right," she repeated, shaking her head. "None of you have any idea. No clue at all."

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“What do you mean?” Ralph asked, turning to the Muggle woman. “Who was that man, anyway? Who’s the Collector?”

Lissa met Ralph’s eyes and the bitter smile fell from her face. She drew a deep, shuddering breath. “He’s... the devil.” She shrugged helplessly. “He found us. The ones that were left when the city emptied out. Me and Park and a bunch of the other street people, we were just beginning to band together, to understand what had happened. And he found us. He was powerful... magical... and he promised us things. But he... he lied.”

Scorpius tilted his head curiously. “So there are others?”

Lissa giggled a little again. “There *were* others. There are hardly any left now. Now that he’s done... *collecting*.”

“What does that mean, Lissa,” Rose asked worriedly, her face going pale.

Lissa shrugged helplessly. “We didn’t want to do it, but he promised to take us with him when the new world came. He took care of us, but for a price. Every day he sent us out into the city, looking for things. He was making... something.” She shook her head and grimaced. “Something awful. He needed lots of very specific ingredients for it. But when he finally had everything he needed... he didn’t need *us* anymore. He started collecting *people* instead. First Park, then, one by one, most of the others. Even the ones who were like him. The magical ones.”

Rose looked perplexed. “He *killed* people? Even other wizards?”

Lissa shook her head again, slowly and emphatically. “It wasn’t just killing. It was... like a game to him. It gave him... *pleasure*. And it made him more powerful. He collected them. When he was done, they weren’t so much dead as they were just... sort of... *sucked dry*. Empty human husks, with everything stripped out of them. He made us bury them in the park, which was the worst part of all. Some of them...” She shuddered violently and met James’ eyes, almost pleadingly. “Some of them were still breathing. They were dead... dead in every way that mattered. But they *breathed*...”

“He’s a rogue wizard,” Ralph said suddenly, glancing from Scorpius to James. “Just taking advantage of the situation here, with all the authorities gone. Right? Just some really deranged, vicious wizard with delusions of grandeur?”

Scorpius scowled thoughtfully. “I’ve been around wizards with delusions of grandeur my whole life. I come from a long line of them, to

be honest. Not many of them could conjure mythical beasts out of thin air. That was some serious dark magic.”

“He referred to a Warlock friend of his,” Rose said, shivering at the memory of the Wendigoes. “Warlocks are very specialized wizards. They make magical weapons, poisons, instruments of mass warfare. That’s where they get their name. But there are hardly any of them left, aren’t there? Most of them were on the side of Voldemort, back in our parents’ day, and got sent to Azkaban. They were the most wicked wizards of all, because they truly believed what they were doing was right. They were unapologetic, and vowed to continue their work if they were ever released.”

“Worlick!” James gasped, his eyes widening.

The others blinked at him. Ralph asked, “Who?”

“The criminal that I met at Azkaban, the one who ended up escaping with Judith’s help! I told you all about it, remember? His name was Worlick! But what if that wasn’t a name? What if it was just another word for Warlock?”

Rose glanced at Scorpius. They shared a strangely uncomfortable look. “It’s... possible.” She acknowledged.

“That’s the whole reason he was in Azkaban to begin with,” James went on, speaking to himself as much as the others. “He was making all sorts of dark magic weapons and poisons! He killed one of Dad’s best aurors using them! He must be the one working with this Collector person! And that means that they’re both involved with... with *Judith!*” He glanced at the others’ faces in turn. “The Lady of the Lake!”

Rose bit her lips in a strange grimace. Scorpius looked away pointedly. Even Ralph shuffled a little on his feet. Only Lissa, the Muggle woman, did not blink. She watched James’ face as if hypnotized.

“Did you ever see her?” he asked, taking half a step closer to her. “A tall woman? With reddish hair? Keen looking, but cold?”

Lissa still met his gaze intently. She shook her head very slowly. “There was another...” she admitted in a near whisper. “But no one ever saw who... or what... it was. They always met in secret. The Collector took orders. Sometimes they argued. He wanted to use it now. The other insisted they wait until a better time. The *perfect* time.”

Scorpius looked sharply at Lissa. “The perfect time for what? What were they talking about using?”

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Lissa still stared at James. Her eyes were wide, eerily intent. In a low, muttering voice, she said, “He knew you. He called you by name...”

James shivered. “What were they talking about, Lissa?” he pressed. “It might be important. What were they waiting for the perfect time for?”

Lissa finally tore her gaze from James’ face. She glanced around at the others, as if noticing them for the first time. When she spoke, it was in a hushed whisper. “The thing they had made, the thing we had to collect all the ingredients for. It was very difficult, they said, but powerful. Terrible. They called it the... the Morrigan Web.” She shuddered.

All the colour fell out of James’ face.

“The Morrigan...” Rose repeated, narrowing her eyes thoughtfully. “I’ve heard of that. The Morrigan was a goddess of war. But what’s a... a Morrigan Web?”

Lissa shook her head slowly. “The Collector told us...” she muttered. “He told us what it is. He told us... it was the end of our world.”

James looked at her, a chill coiling down his spine. In his mind, he saw Petra’s dream story, saw her handwriting scribbled all over it, blending together into a cacophony of random thoughts and ideas. And in the middle, written larger and more emphatically than the rest, each letter pressed into the parchment as if written with great force, was that same phrase: *the Morrigan Web*.

Petra knew about it. Petra was involved.

“You should all return this moment,” Viktor called suddenly, snapping James out of his reverie. “We will protect the young lady until her possessions are returned and she can facilitate her own way back. The Muggle woman will be taken to the authorities.”

Ralph shook his head. “I’m staying with Rose,” he insisted, and James saw that he was still smarting from the guilt of leaving her during the attack. “If that Collector person attacked us once, he may try it again.”

“You may be more right than you know,” Piotre admitted darkly, swooping nearby on his broom. “As I told Mister Potter here, the Wendigoes cannot be killed, only repulsed. They have surely returned to their master, whoever or whatever he may be.”

Zane returned to the group, his face serious. "I told Viktor about the Collector," he nodded.

"An opportunist," Viktor acknowledged. "The worst kind of wizard imaginable. Where some exploit disasters to loot goods, people like him delight in looting souls. We will find him and he will pay for what he has done," this he directed at Lissa, meeting her eyes gravely. Turning back to the others, he went on, "For now, however, it is all the more reason for you to return to safety. I am not asking. You have already broken numerous edicts in coming here. Do not doubt that I will see you prosecuted if you disobey me."

"Viktor," Zane said, raising his voice. "Seriously. We can't leave without--"

"You can and you will," Viktor commanded sternly. "Immediately. I do not care how or why you came to be here, but believe me, you have already caused more trouble than you know. Go now or face the consequences."

As he spoke, thankfully, two other harriers zoomed low along the street, converging on them. One of them, James saw, was carrying a pink, fluttering shape in his fist.

"The young lady's property," he called out, setting down on the street and holding up the cardigan. "It got conveniently hung up on a statue in Union Square. Everything seems to be in order."

He handed the cardigan to Rose. "Thanks," she said sheepishly.

Viktor nodded firmly. "I suppose that settles that, then. Are there any other arguments?"

James thought he sensed the slightest undertone of wry humour in the former champion's words. He shook his head emphatically.

"Excellent. Then off with you. Miss?" This, he addressed to Lissa as he held a hand out to her. "There is a Magical Integration Bureau office on the Brooklyn Bridge blockade. They will assist you."

Lissa nodded wearily.

"You first, Rose," Zane sighed, producing his green ring from his pocket. "We'll follow."

Rose nodded. She rummaged in the pocket of her cardigan, found her own green ring, and showed it to the others. "Sorry, everyone," she said, smiling wanly.

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Ralph smiled back at her. “Just get back safely. We still have one more jump to make from there, back through the cabinet. It’s probably the middle of the night, Hogwarts time.”

“That’s true,” she nodded. “All right. See you all on the other side.” With that, she jammed the ring onto her finger. An instant later she vanished with a sort of rushing pop.

Scorpius didn’t wait. With a brisk sigh, he donned his own ring and disappeared.

“I’m sorry, Zane,” James said meekly, turning to his friend. “Really.”

Zane met his gaze, but his eyes remained hard. He nodded curtly. “Let’s just go.”

“What about Nastasia?” Ralph asked, glancing around.

“Already gone,” Zane shrugged, glancing down at his green ring. “We both thought it would be best. After, you know... everything.”

Without looking up, he pushed his ring onto his finger and vanished.

James drew a deep breath and let it out, feeling thoroughly miserable. Thoughts swirled around his head in a sort of storm: Petra, the Morrigan Web, Worlick, the Lady of the Lake, the Collector, even Nastasia, especially the wounded look on her face when he had accused her of caring only about herself. He dug his own ring out of his pocket, feeling the conspicuous glare of Viktor Krum watching from his broom, fifty feet away.

“Ralph,” he asked quietly, pausing with his green ring poised before his finger. “When we were talking about Worlick and his escape, why did you all look so strange?”

Ralph met his eyes briefly, and then glanced away. “It isn’t that,” he admitted uncomfortably. “It’s the other part.”

“What other part?” James asked, an edge of exasperation coming into his voice.

Ralph glanced at him again and drew a deep breath. “The Lady of the Lake,” he admitted. “It’s all just a little... weird. You know?”

James shook his head firmly. “No, I don’t know. What’s weird about that? It makes perfect sense. She helped Worlick escape so he could help her and the Collector make some sort of ultimate magical weapon. It’s horrible, but what’s weird about it?”

Ralph frowned in consternation. “James,” he said, lowering his voice still further. “I don’t really know how to say this. I guess I sort of thought you already knew...”

“What, Ralph?” James demanded, losing his patience. “Out with it!”

Ralph lowered his ring and ran a hand through his thick hair. He glanced out over the street, seemed to see Viktor watching, and then returned his gaze to James. His face was a mask of miserable resignation. “James,” he whispered harshly, leaning close. “No one else *ever saw* this Lady of the Lake person. Only you. Did you not know that?”

James stared at Ralph in disbelief. He narrowed his eyes. “But... that’s ridiculous! You were all there in the World between the Worlds! She was there with us in the black castle! We spoke to her!”

Ralph shuffled his feet again, but shook his head insistently. “We heard a voice,” he admitted. “But I never saw anyone. I just saw... the other Petra. The rest was just shadows and echoes. Zane and I sort of thought it was all a trick, that the other Petra-- the Morgan version-- was just, sort of, mad. Talking in two voices.”

“Ralph,” James hissed, an incredulous smile crossing his face. “You’re joking, right? The Lady of the Lake...” The smile faded from his face. “Ralph, she killed Lucy. You saw it happen.”

“*Somebody* killed her,” Ralph agreed gravely. “But who? I *didn’t* see it happen. I thought it was Morgan. Zane too.”

“But what about the other times she showed up,” James insisted. “On the Zephyr! You saw her shooting from the windows at all those WULF blokes, blasting them out of the air!”

“I saw a lot of people,” Ralph agreed reluctantly. “There were loads of people on the train with us.”

“Ralph, this is just daft!” James exclaimed, raising his voice. “What about all the other times! What about...”

He stopped as cold realization flooded over him. There were no other times. The other times he had encountered Judith, first in the halls of the Aquapolis, and then in the North Sea, when she had whisked Worlick away in the form of a living waterspout, none of his friends had been present.

“But on the Night of the Unveiling,” James said, thinking hard. “She was there on the street, calling out about how my dad was guilty,

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about how he killed that Senator. You heard her. She was right there with Morgan, standing side by side!”

Ralph shook his head slowly but emphatically. “I did hear people screaming things. I heard stuff like that in the crowd. But I didn’t see anyone. None of us did, James. That’s why everyone gets a little nervous when you talk about Judith. Because most people... *they don’t exactly believe she exists.*”

“James!” Viktor barked from some distance away. “Both of you! You must go! Now!”

Ralph glanced aside nervously. “Come on, James,” he said, readying his ring. “We can talk about this more later.”

James was too stunned to respond. Ralph nudged him. “On three,” he suggested again. “Ready?”

James nodded feebly. Ralph counted.

They both put on their rings.

Twenty minutes later, James, Ralph, Rose and Scorpius tumbled out of the vanishing cabinet into the dark stillness of the Great Hall.

“Home,” Rose said fervently. “For a little while there, I felt like I’d never see this place again. Is that mad?”

“I think we all felt that way a bit,” Ralph agreed.

Quietly, disconsolately, the students made their way out of the Great Hall, whispering goodnight to Ralph at the dungeon stairs. Tiptoeing so as not to arouse the attention of the always wandering Filch and Mrs. Norris, the three Gryffindors climbed the stairs to the portrait of the Fat Lady. Scorpius muttered the password, granting them entrance to the deserted common room. Orange embers glowed in the fireplace, casting the only light.

Rose glanced at the large clock near the fireplace and yawned extravagantly. She turned to Scorpius and James in turn.

“Thanks,” she said seriously. “Thanks for waiting with me tonight. You didn’t have to. But I am glad you did.”

James nodded. Scorpius shrugged, as if to say *what else were we going to do?*

“Rose,” James said tiredly, stepping close to his cousin. “You don’t believe in Judith, do you?”

A pained expression crossed her face. “I... James, I don’t doubt what you believe. It’s...”

“It’s all right, Rose,” James nodded. “I suppose it doesn’t really matter. But will you help me with something anyway?”

“Of course,” she replied, looking rather relieved. “After tonight, I feel like I owe you all a bit of an enormous favour. What is it?”

James glanced back at Scorpius, who was watching unabashedly. “Help me figure out what the Morrigan Web is.”

Rose frowned slightly. “Shouldn’t you just tell your father--”

“I will,” James interjected, looking back at her. “But still. You’re dead smart, just like your mum, and I have a feeling that dad will need all the help he can get.”

Rose nodded. “I’ll help. We’ll start this weekend. All right?”

James agreed. A moment later, Rose turned and climbed the stairs to the girls’ dormitory.

“I really shouldn’t mention this,” Scorpius muttered as they made their way up the spiral stairs to their own dormitory. “But you remember what tonight was, don’t you?”

James shook his head vaguely. “I don’t know and I don’t care,” he said.

Scorpius nodded. “That’s good. It would have been rushed in the best case, after all. Even without everything that happened in New Amsterdam.”

James stopped on the stairs. His eyes widened in the darkness. “Oh no.” he said slowly. “It can’t be. I can’t truly have missed it *again...*”

Scorpius glanced back at him. “I thought you said you didn’t care?” he asked sardonically.

James stared at him in the darkness, his expression blank, his mouth hanging slightly open. It would’ve actually been funny, if it wasn’t so preposterously frustrating.

“Don’t worry,” Scorpius said, turning and resuming his climb up the dormitory stairs. “There’s always next year. After all... it’s only Quidditch.”



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5. SUSPICIONS & SECRETS

The next morning, James skipped breakfast for the first time in his career at Hogwarts. He simply couldn't bear the thought of the jeering he would likely receive from the rest of the Gryffindors, and the Quidditch team in particular. Hungry and unhappy, he made his way to his first class, Advanced Flight with the irrepresible Professor Cabe Ridcully, his Thunderstreak propped over his shoulder and his full knapsack clumping against his back. He sighed, knowing that what he had avoided at breakfast would surely be waiting for him on the South lawn with the rest of the fourth years.

In this, he wasn't wrong.

"James!" Graham called seriously, rushing to meet him on the dewy grass. "You're alive! It's a miracle!"

"Shut up, Graham," James grumped, stalking past him. Graham turned to follow.

"Everyone else thinks you just skived off, but I told them you had to have been attacked by skrewts or something. What was it? Come on, you can tell me."

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James threw him a sceptical look. "It was Wendigos, actually."

"It was Wendigos!" Graham announced loudly, cupping his hands to his mouth. "Wendigos! Terrible, terrible things, that! Er," he turned back to James. "Is that a thing or a person? Did you duel somebody named Wendy? Blimey, I hope you won."

"You should have *seen* the look on poor Cameron's face," Deirdre Finnegan scolded, joining them on the lawn. "He and his little Potter fan club, all of them looked fit to cry."

"Devindar had a spot all picked out for you," Graham added. "Seeker, in honour of dear old dad. Assuming you could come up with the skills, of course."

"All right, all right!" James hissed, dropping his knapsack to the grass and hefting his broom. "Don't you think I feel bad enough about it?"

Deirdre shook her head. "No, I don't. This isn't funny anymore, James."

"It's not supposed to be funny!" James cried. "Do I look like I'm laughing?"

Graham cocked his head speculatively. "Well, you don't have much of a sense of humour under the best conditions."

James closed his eyes tightly, calming himself. After a moment, he turned to Deirdre. "So who got Seeker, then?"

Deirdre rolled her eyes. "Lance Vassar."

"Lance..." James repeated disbelievingly. "But he's no athlete. I've seen him fly. If it wasn't for that fancy top-shelf broom of his..."

"Or the fact that his parents are having a new scoreboard built for the Quidditch pitch," Graham nodded. "Complete with clockwork scorekeeping, lit numerals *and* firework scoring charms."

"Really?" James said, impressed despite himself. "That'll be pretty cool, actually."

"But *Lance at Seeker!*" Deirdre repeated pedantically. "How often do you think those fireworks will be going off for a Gryffindor win?"

James sighed deeply. "Perhaps he'll be better than we expect?"

Graham shook his head and frowned. "He'd better be. But seriously, James. Next year, just break your own leg or something. We're running out of excuses for you not showing up at try-outs."

The ribbing continued throughout the morning. Ralph, Rose and Scorpius, of course, knew the real reason why James had missed

Quidditch try-outs, providing some cover for him at lunchtime. Few believed the fantastical tales about their adventure in New Amsterdam, although the story did provide a convenient distraction, and by afternoon most of the school seemed to have forgotten about James' missed opportunity.

All except for Lance Vassar, who passed James as he queued up near the Yorke vanishing cabinet.

"I don't blame you, James," he said quietly, patting James on the shoulder. "It's better this way, really. You're a good kid. I didn't want to embarrass you or anything."

He swept on, followed by his usual entourage of older Gryffindors and hangers-on.

"He's serious," Ralph said wonderingly. "He wasn't even being sarcastic. What a pompous berk!"

James shook his head, his cheeks reddening with anger and embarrassment.

A metallic slam sounded behind him. Turning, he saw the strange narrow doors of the Yorke cabinet. Of course, it wasn't a true vanishing cabinet at all, having come from a strictly Muggle school. The green-painted lockers had been especially charmed to function as a portal, despite their completely mundane appearance.

Ralph shrugged. "Looks like we're up next."

Together, they approached the lockers and thumbed open two of the narrow doors. The interiors were very small and shallow. Ralph peered into his locker with obvious trepidation.

"It's going to be a bit snug," he commented.

James nodded. "Want a little help? I could try to *Reducio* you a little." It was supposed to be a joke, but Ralph seemed to consider it. Finally he shook his head reluctantly. With a small shrug, James stepped into his locker. Next to him, the metal wall groaned as Ralph crammed into his own space.

A moment later, the metal doors swung to with a squeak and a slam. A flash of blinding light erupted all around James, accompanied by a sense of falling. The locker was too small to jump in, but the confined space kept him from tumbling out when the door popped back open.

He peered out, blinking. Shadows moved in a dim space, echoing with distant voices. James clambered out of the locker, joining his classmates.

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“What is this?” he asked Joseph Torrance. “Looks like some sort of... dungeon.”

Joseph nodded as he glanced around. “But I’ve never seen a dungeon painted that particular shade of, er, mint green.”

“A little help?” Ralph said in a strained voice.

James turned around and saw Ralph still crammed awkwardly into his locker, waving a hand at him. James grabbed his friend’s hand with both of his and gave a sharp tug. Ralph tumbled out, nearly bringing the narrow metal door with him. As soon as he was out, the locker doors slammed shut, sending a loud CLANG echoing along the narrow room.

“Thanks,” Ralph muttered, running a hand through his dishevelled hair. “Blimey, it’s hot in here. What is this, a steam bath?”

“It might be, for all we know,” James said, glancing around the dim space. Painted cinder block walls formed a long room, floored with cracked concrete and divided by a long, wooden bench. The rear wall was covered with lockers beneath a single high, cramped window, its milky pebbled glass reinforced with wire mesh. At the head of the room was a heavy wooden door with a single square window set into it. Shapes moved beyond this, accompanied by the dense echo of raucous voices.

Fiona Fourcompass stamped her foot impatiently. “What kind of reception is this, anyway? What are we supposed to do? Where’s our teacher?”

“Door’s locked,” Kevin Murdoch announced, giving the door handle a futile pull. He produced his wand and grinned, fingering it. “Dumb Muggles don’t know locks can’t stop *me*.”

“I wouldn’t--” James began, but it was too late. Murdoch levelled his wand at the door handle and loudly called the unlocking spell.

There was a flash of dense, purple light and Murdoch flew backwards, propelled by some invisible force. He bowled into several other students, sending them tumbling backwards over the narrow bench.

James jumped back, bumping into Ralph but avoiding the domino effect that sent most of the others sprawling to the floor. At that moment, a loud clamour sounded in the hall outside, a sort of jangling bell. As if in response, the babble of voices rose in pitch. Doors slammed in the distance, closing off the sound by degrees, and then, just as Kevin Murdoch and the rest began to scramble upright from the floor, there came the unmistakable sound of a key socking into a lock. The door at the head of the room swung ponderously open, revealing a tall, middle-

aged woman with stern features and iron grey hair pulled back into a tight bun. She surveyed the room grimly, her eyes enlarged behind a pair of heavy, black-framed spectacles.

“How *dare* you attempt magic in our school...” she breathed, her low voice echoing along the narrow room. James saw that she was quite thin, almost painfully so, and dressed in a severe grey pant suit. Her heavy glasses seemed far too large for her face, perched on the blade of her nose like a see-saw. Behind the bulbous lenses, her eyes flicked over every face in the room, as if cataloguing them. Then, primly, she stepped inside and allowed the door to swing shut behind her. Without a word, she approached the corner nearest the door and bent to pick something up. When she turned back, she was holding a white laundry bag, stuffed and dangling by its drawstring.

“While you are within these halls,” she said, speaking with such chilly calm that it seemed to lower the room’s temperature by ten degrees, “you will *not... work... magic*. You will not *use the word* magic. You will not say anything about witches, or wizards, or any other detail of your secret little world. I would not have thought I’d need to say that, but apparently I do. If that door had not been especially fortified by your own masters, you would apparently even now be roaming the halls of this school, wreaking whatever magical havoc you wished, regardless of the consequences. All of you, on your feet, *if you please*.”

James and Ralph made room as those that had fallen backwards clambered upright again. As the class shuffled into place on either side of the bench, James counted eight students total. All of them, strangely, were Hogwarts students.

“My name,” the woman said icily, “is Miss Corsica. I will be your liaison and teacher whenever you are here at Yorke Academy. If you have questions, you will address them to me. Is that understood?”

James took the opportunity to glance at Ralph, his eyebrows raised. He nodded surreptitiously toward the woman. Ralph shrugged one shoulder. It certainly wasn’t the Corsica they had been half-expecting.

The woman drew a quick breath and went on. “In the absence of any questions, allow me to enlighten you about your purpose here. As you are surely aware, certain events earlier this year have caused a serious crack in the shroud of secrecy that has hidden your world from ours for centuries. Many believe that this shroud will soon fall away completely,

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thrusting the magical and non-magical worlds together once again. To soften the potential shock of such a revelation, a programme of careful, deliberate integration has been undertaken. That, students, is why *you* are here. *You* will interact with a select group of Yorke students who have been made aware of your world. Then, when and if the time comes that your secrets are fully revealed, *they* will assist their friends in adapting to that new reality.”

As Corsica continued, James leaned toward Ralph and whispered, “So *that’s* why the Minister of Magic was so keen on international magical cooperation all of a sudden! It was all just a cover for *this*.”

Ralph bobbed his head. “I wonder if your dad knows about it?”

That, James thought, was a very good question. One he would get answered as soon as he could.

In front of James, Murdoch raised his hand. Corsica paused, obviously peeved at the interruption.

“Apparently we have a question after all,” She stated bluntly, raising one eyebrow at Murdoch.

“Just this,” Murdoch said, glancing around at his classmates. “If this is all about getting the Muggles ready for the magical world, then why aren’t there any other wizarding schools here? Why just Hogwarts people?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Corsica replied tersely. “It was a strictly voluntary programme. Perhaps not everyone in the magical world is quite as prepared to mingle with us as you lovely children are.”

James grimaced, not only at Corsica’s obvious sarcasm, but at the probable truth of her words. It was hard to imagine any Durmstrang students wanting to mix with Muggles, even if Durmstrang was a part of the programme-- which was unlikely, considering their attitude even toward Muggle-born witches and wizards. Beauxbatons students were more accepting of Muggles, of course, but would probably be bored at the very idea of attending a dull, non-magical school in some nondescript English village. Still, why weren’t there any Alma Aleron students? Considering the popularity of the Progressive Element at the American school, this sort of thing should have been just their cup of tea. He reminded himself to ask Zane about it next time he saw him. Then, of course, he reminded himself that Zane was a bit shirty with him at the moment. He sighed unhappily as Corsica went on.

“Regarding the students here at Yorke, those in your classes know who and what you are, and have already met many of you at your own school. A few others are aware, including some teachers, though not all of them by any means. Thus, you will go nowhere without me. You will not interact with any other students outside of my presence. And you will *never* come here outside of class time. Is that understood?”

There was a general murmur of sullen assent.

“Very well,” Corsica said curtly. “I see by the way most of you are dressed that you do not have any concept of the term ‘physical education’. Not to worry, you will know soon enough. Suffice it to say, it will behoove you to attire yourselves in these.”

She swung the laundry bag forward and allowed it to flop to the floor. The drawstring loosened, revealing a mass of dingy grey tee shirts and navy shorts.

“What are these,” Fiona Fourcompass frowned. “You can’t seriously...”

Murdoch pulled one of the tee shirts out of the bag and held it up. Blue letters on the front of the shirt formed the words ST. BRUTUS SECURE CENTRE. “What kind of place is this? Is this where we’re supposed to be from?”

“Tut-tut,” Corsica chided, raising her chin. “You can’t very well just show up at Yorke Academy with no back story. As far as most of the students here are concerned, you represent a rehabilitation programme wherein... er... *troubled* youths are reintroduced to law-abiding society. Now do change your clothing with haste. Girls will take the changing room on the left, boys on the right. Quickly, students. Your new classmates await.”

It seemed there was nothing for it but to change into the horrible gym clothing. Disconsolately, James joined the rest as they dug through the sack, searching for a tee shirt and shorts that would fit. The clothing was all rather hopelessly rumpled and had a disconcerting dampness to it, as if it had spent the past few decades in a mouldy basement closet.

Ten minutes later, the students reconvened in the main locker room, barely recognizing each other in their new uniforms.

“This is ridiculous,” Ralph seethed under his breath. James looked him over.

“So your shorts are a little snug,” he commented, trying to downplay the ridiculous shortness of the big boy’s blue trunks. “It’s not

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that bad, really. At least your shirt doesn't hang down nearly to your knees. Nobody can even tell that I'm *wearing* shorts"

"Single file line, please," Corsica announced loudly as the students gathered. "Your masters have informed me that you do not, in fact, partake in physical education at your own school. Thus, they have given me permission to arrange a particularly rigorous regimen for you. There will be no complaints. If you cannot keep up with the Yorke football squad-- seven times champions though they may be-- then perhaps you should not have considered signing up for this class to begin with. Comport yourselves well, and perhaps you may earn the respect of your new classmates, and in time the goodwill of the entire non-magical world. Understood?"

There was even less enthusiasm this time. Corsica interrupted the muttered response with a raised finger. "The proper answer is a cheerful, 'yes, Miss Corsica.' Now, *am I understood?*"

A scattering of voices repeated the phrase discordantly. Corsica seemed content with this. In fact, to James' eye, she seemed almost to be enjoying the discomfort of her new charges.

"Very well," Corsica nodded. "I will lead the way to the gymnasium. First, however, you will form a tidy line in the hallway outside this door. No talking, please, as classes have reconvened. If by some chance, however, you believed you would be permitted to bring your magical wands into the school proper, I fear you were mistaken. As you pass, you will deposit any wands in this." She nudged a large plastic pail with her foot.

There were groans throughout the room. James himself had slipped his wand into his sock. He glanced at Ralph, frowning thinly. Together with much of the rest of the class, they retrieved their wands and began to pass, one by one, through the door. The pail clattered repeatedly as wands were dropped into it.

James was the last to leave the locker room. As he passed Corsica, she said his name in a low voice.

Surprised, James turned, looking back at the stern-faced teacher. She was offering him a small, tight smile.

"So, how's Albus doing, then?" she asked in a low voice. "And little Lily? She didn't perchance end up in Slytherin as well, did she? I would find that a bit... unexpected."

James frowned at her in surprise. "How do you...?"

Corsica shrugged languidly and reached to touch her overlarge glasses. “Life is a funny thing, James. Considering my youth, Azkaban was out of the question, thankfully, thus I was sentenced to a year at the Ministry’s field office in Australia, doomed to spend my penance cataloguing poisonous water beetles. Hard to imagine the point, really. Absolutely *everything* in Australia seems to be poisonous. Then, happily, this post came up, and a certain unnamed benefactor convinced the Wizengamot that it might teach me a certain necessary... humility.”

Corsica removed her glasses as she spoke. When she did so, her entire face changed-- indeed, every aspect of her appearance shifted out of focus, then resolved again differently, as if the spectacles had been the keystone of a sort of projected, magical disguise. Suddenly, Tabitha Corsica stood before him, her long black hair hanging like an ebony curtain down her back, her pretty, piercingly black eyes twinkling at him.

“It’s you...” James muttered in disbelief.

“It’s me,” she agreed, cocking her head coyly. “The Ministry felt that my youth and, er, physical charm might be a detriment to my acceptance here at Yorke, thus...” she sneered with distaste at the chunky black glasses in her hand, “This.” Her expression cleared again and she smiled at James. “It *is* nice to see you again, James. Our last meeting was under such... unfortunate circumstances. I just want you to know that I don’t blame you for anything. You probably cannot help being an insufferable, meddling, destroyer of other people’s hopes and dreams. I’m sure it just comes... naturally.”

“Tabitha,” James said, shaking his head. “I didn’t... that’s not how it...”

“Tut-tut,” she interrupted, waving her glasses dismissively. “It’s all in the past. I am content to let bygones be bygones. We have a whole term ahead of us, James.” She paused consideringly, and then put her glasses back on again. Her appearance changed back to her older, grey-haired persona. She leaned closer, as if she meant to share a dark secret. “I promise to make it *challenging*, James.” Her smile widened, thinning her lips and crinkling the corners of her now-grey eyes. “We both know how much you like... a good... *challenge*.”



James saw no reason to keep Corsica's identity a secret. He told Ralph, Rose and Scorpius about it that evening as they gathered around a table in the corner of the library.

"She did look sort of familiar," Ralph nodded thoughtfully. "It's not so much a disguise as it is just an older version of herself. Maybe the glasses are charmed to age her by twenty years or so."

"Well they sure don't make her any more likeable," James grouched. "She's going to be a right nightmare. I'm going to be sore for days from all that running she made us do."

Ralph moaned in agreement. "And what about that rope-climbing bit in the gymnasium? I have it on good authority that that's not even physically possible."

Rose pursed her lips. "I hear that the Muggle students did all right."

"Some of them, yeah," James admitted. "But they're, like, actual athletes. Champion footballers, apparently, and twice the size of most of us."

Ralph brightened a bit. "At least Comstock couldn't do it. Smarmy little git just dangled there like a chunk of fat bait on a fishing line."

Rose frowned in distaste. "I thought the whole point of this programme was to create a bridge between the Muggle and magical worlds."

"That's what Corsica says," James nodded dourly.

"*What's* what Corsica says?" another voice asked, accompanied by a pile of books plunking to the table. James leaned back in his chair as Albus plopped down next to him. "You're not talking about Tabby, are you?"

"Ugh," James groaned. "I feel the sick rising in my throat every time you call her that."

“She turned up at Yorke today,” Ralph explained. “Turns out she’s been sent there by the Ministry to oversee a sort of getting-to-know-you programme with the Muggles, just in case the Vow of Secrecy completely falls apart.”

Albus considered this for a moment. “Makes sense to me.

“Yeah, well it seems totally *dodgy* to *me*,” James countered, sitting up in his seat. “The Ministry is supposed to be trying to fix the Vow of Secrecy, not getting ready to give it up entirely.”

Ralph shrugged. “Maybe they’re just trying to be prepared. You know, just in case.”

“It does seem a bit more like planning than preparing,” Rose admitted. “But either way, it’s out of our hands. We’ve got enough to worry about, what with this Collector person going all native in New Amsterdam and planning some magical coupe or something.” She met James’ eyes as he glanced at her. “Which I am still researching, James, and no leads yet. Although I am *sure* I’ve heard of it somewhere.”

Albus knitted his brow. “Heard of what? And who the bloody hell is the Collector?”

“Don’t say that word,” Lily chided blandly as she squeezed in across from him, letting her knapsack thump to the floor next to her chair. “If mum was here, she’d leather you with a hex.”

James sighed impatiently. “The Collector is some vicious wizard who’s taken up hiding in New Amsterdam, enslaving a bunch of people who stayed around after the evacuation. He’s planning some mega-magical attack or something. The Morrigan Web.”

“What word am I not supposed to say?” Albus frowned, turning back to Lily. “Bloody hell? What are you, Mum’s deputy or something?”

“Maybe I am.” Lily replied primly, raising her eyebrows and opening one of Albus’ books. “This isn’t even a textbook. It’s one of those Dragonheart Twins Adventure stories. Where did you even get this? They don’t stock drivel like this in the library.”

“They don’t stock those horrible Persephone Remora vampire books either but that doesn’t stop *you* from soaking up every last bloody one of them like it was bloody ambrosia.”

“That’s it,” Lily firmed her jaw. “I’m totally telling mum on you.”

Albus dismissed her with a wave of his hand. “Wait a minute, are you lot saying that that daft story about James getting lost in New

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Amsterdam and chased by zombies is more than an excuse for his shirking out of Quidditch try-outs?”

Rose grimaced at the word “zombies”. James threw up his hands in exasperation, but it was Scorpius who spoke up. “It was all true, even if it did provide a handy excuse for your brother.”

Lily glanced from Scorpius to James. “So you really did travel to New Amsterdam with Zane Walker and meet some wicked wizard and get chased by zombies?”

Rose’s patience snapped. “They *weren’t zombies*,” she declared. “They were *Wendigoes*. Very creepy old magic, of ancient native American origin--”

“And why didn’t you take me?” Lily demanded, her eyes blazing at James.

“Lil, don’t be a berk. You aren’t even enrolled in any classes at Alma Aleron. Besides, it was extremely dangerous. Dad made me promise to keep you safe. The last thing I’m going to do is drag you along on one of Zane’s dodgy adventures.”

“You felt perfectly fine dragging *me* along,” Ralph grumped.

Albus grinned. “Without you, Ralph, who’d break all of James’ falls?”

James rolled his eyes. “And can we maybe not discuss all of this with the entire school?”

“I didn’t realize I counted as the entire school,” Lily sniffed.

“Discuss what?” Scorpius sighed in boredom. “All we have is one daft wizard with delusions of grandeur pretending to create some sort of magical super-weapon, a slippery American witch-Pixie with a perhaps overdeveloped sense of self-preservation, and a batty former Slytherin whose doing time as a babysitter of Muggle high-schoolers.”

“Sounds like more than enough for me,” James muttered. “And you forgot about Dumbledore’s evil twin at Durmstrang.”

“I didn’t forget him,” Scorpius replied, returning to his books. “I purposely left him out. Even among witches and wizards, some things are too crazy to be considered.”

James dropped his chin onto his folded arms. There was also the mystery of Petra’s dream story with the words *The Morrigan Web* scrawled across it in Petra’s handwriting, not to mention the mysterious voice (Petra?) that had assailed him in the halls on first night. James couldn’t help feeling that somehow, some way, it was all connected. But how? As

obnoxious as Scorpius had been of late, he was probably right: some things were probably not worth bringing up. At least not yet.

Lily pushed Albus' book back at him and then leaned across the table toward James. "Did Dad really ask you to look after me?"

James glanced up at her disconsolately. "Yeah. For whatever it's worth."

She smiled slightly. "Thanks, big brother. But don't do too good of a job, all right? I want to have a bit of fun."

James nodded. "Don't worry. I've got my hands pretty full as it is."

Lily's smile widened. "Good," she replied brightly. "I can look after myself, anyway."



The weekend came and went with surprising speed. James spent most of it in the Gryffindor common room trying to catch up on his homework and forget about the many distractions that begged his attention. Observing his dogged perseverance, Rose attempted to help, but she was almost always accompanied by Scorpius, whose smug presence only served as further distraction.

"What's with you two?" James hissed at her during one of Scorpius' rare absences. "Are you snogging or what?"

"No!" she insisted, not meeting his eyes. "And none of your business, you nosy git!"

James cocked his head insistently. "Yeah, well. So are you?"

"Maybe," she admitted curtly. "What do you think, James? You like Scorpius, don't you?"

"Not like *you* do, apparently," James scoffed. "Lately, he seems a lot more Slytherin than Gryffindor if you ask me. I think you should be quit with him."

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“Well I guess nobody asked you,” she muttered. “You don’t know him. You weren’t even here last year.”

“I know he’s keeping secrets.”

Rose glanced up at him suddenly. She narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Secrets. You know what they are, right? Sneaky stuff he’s not telling people? He’s up to something.”

Rose continued to stare at him meaningfully. Then, a thought seemed to strike her and she shook her head dismissively. “Ah,” she said to herself.

“‘Ah’ what?” James pressed.

“Ah nothing. Get back to your charms essay. It’s almost lunchtime.”

James sensed that Rose knew something, but wouldn’t tell him no matter how hard he tried. Reluctantly, he returned to his homework, his resolve to find out what Scorpius was up to firmer than ever.

His opportunity came on Sunday night.

It had been a particularly unhappy day. Gryffindor played its first Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, a rare Sunday afternoon event, densely attended as the first match of the season. A dull, spritzing rain suffused the pitch into a wet fog, which wouldn’t have been so bad if not for the fact that Hufflepuff had taken an early lead and held onto it throughout the entire three hour affair. James huddled under his wet cloak between Rose and Heth Thomas, alternately squinting through the fog and donning his spectacles, which would quickly become obscured with spatters of fine mist.

The sight of Lance Vassar playing Seeker was singularly galling, especially since the boy seemed to bring neither skill nor passion to the position. He spent most of the match hovering near the new scoreboard, glancing idly around the pitch, ducking behind the enormous board whenever a Bludger spun his way.

For their own part, the rest of the Gryffindor team seemed preoccupied with just staying on their new brooms. Along with the scoreboard, Lance’s parents had provided a fleet of brand new Pulsars, broomsticks so advanced that they had reportedly been developed by a top secret branch of the Department of Mysteries. James recognized them as the same type ridden by the Harriers during their adventure in New Amsterdam. What had been shockingly fast and manoeuvrable in the

canyons of the abandoned city, however, were almost too much to handle in the confines of the Quidditch pitch. As James watched, Mei Isis, one of Gryffindor's beaters, raised her club and swooped toward a spiralling Bludger only to flash straight past it, nearly colliding with Devindar Das near the rings. He swore at her in the blowing rain, and she swore angrily back, her long black ponytail flinging rainwater over her shoulder.

Lance watched this with aloof disapproval. Behind him, the scoreboard shot a volley of golden fireworks, announcing another Hufflepuff score.

"His hair's not even wet!" Rose suddenly proclaimed, pointing. "He's charmed the air around him to keep the rain off, just so his haircut won't get mussed! What a total prat!"

"Perhaps he did it so he could see better," Heth suggested unconvincingly.

"I might believe that," James muttered, "if he actually seemed to be trying to *see* anything. He's just waiting the match out so he can get back to giving me smug looks in the common room."

"This is your fault, James!" Deirdre Finnegan interjected from behind him, poking him on the shoulder. "If only you hadn't missed try-outs!"

James glanced back at her in annoyance. "Are you ever going to let me forget that?"

She glared at him meaningfully from her seat next to Graham Warton. "No!" They both answered in unison.

The match ended ignominiously, when the Hufflepuff Seeker, Julia Lemon, appeared from a long swoop around the Ravenclaw grandstand, the Snitch glittering in her outstretched hand.

On the other side of the pitch, Lance shrugged and applauded gamely. "Good match!" he called over the sizzling rain. "Good match, everyone! Huzzah!"

James leapt from his seat, forgetting for a moment that he wasn't on a broom and could not go knock Lance off of his.

By that night, the persistent drizzle had turned into a steady, blatting downpour. The rain coated the windows, punctuated with flickers of lightning and rumbling thunderclaps. James was not looking forward to the next morning. Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures class was scheduled for a boat ride into the middle of the lake for a visit with the Giant Squid. Knowing Hagrid, he would barely even notice if it was

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still raining, much less consider reconvening the class to the warmth of the barn menagerie. Also, annoyingly, Morton Comstock and the other Muggles from Yorke would be there, surely complaining about the rain and the lake and how boring the Giant Squid is compared to the monsters in their stupid computer games.

It was a consistent wonder to James that so many Muggles preferred pretend challenges on video screens over the rewards of any real life challenge. Of course, as Ralph often reminded him, when one got eaten by a dragon in a video game, one could simply hit reset and try again. There was no real danger involved. James didn't say so to Ralph, but he secretly believed that it was that very element-- the danger-- that made the adventure worth having.

He was just drifting into a fitful sleep when a clap of earth-shaking thunder rattled the window near his bed. Lightning flooded the room, illuminating everything in one brief second. James sighed and rolled over, annoyed to have been startled alert. He peered into the depths of the darkened room, surprised that no one else had woken up. He saw Graham's arm draped over the side of the bed. On the other side of the tower, Heth Thomas seemed to have fallen asleep while studying. A soft snore emanated from beneath the book splayed open on his face. Next to him, a candle burned low on the night table.

The candlelight reached the end of Scorpius' bed. James raised his head and frowned curiously. Scorpius' bed was unmade, lumpy with pillows and blankets. It was empty.

James nearly jumped out of his own bed, his heart suddenly pounding with anticipation. He tiptoed over to Scorpius' four-poster and dropped to one knee next to it. He peered underneath. There was nothing beneath the bed but a single sock and a flock of dust-bunnies.

"No shoes," James whispered to himself. "That little snake! Where is he?"

James stood up slowly, thinking hard. He knew he had to follow Scorpius, but how? There was nothing for it but to sneak out himself and hope to track him down. Perhaps Cedric would be out roaming the halls and offer to help. Then again, perhaps Peeves would show up first and raise a ruckus. James couldn't take the risk of being caught, at least not before he found Scorpius.

He nodded to himself and returned to his bed. As quietly and quickly as he could, he dressed in jeans and a dark tee shirt, opened his

trunk and retrieved the Invisibility Cloak. With a flourish, he threw it over himself, checking to make sure that it hung low enough to hide his feet.

Another clap of thunder shook the walls, startling him. Across the room, something heavy fell to the floor with a clunk. James leapt at the sound of it, his heart slamming up into his throat. He spun on the spot, eyes wide, and saw Heth rolling over in his sleep, muttering. The book had fallen off his face and thumped to the floor.

“It’s just a Transfiguration textbook,” he muttered to himself, willing his heart to stop pounding. Why was he so jumpy all of a sudden? He reminded himself that he wasn’t off on any perilous adventure. He was simply following Scorpius, trying to find out what the boy was sneaking around about in the middle of the night. It was rather a long standing mystery, in fact. The boy had been strangely missing in the middle of the night ever since his first year. Why? Where was he going? Was he meeting someone? What were they up to?

A chill shook James’ shoulders. Was Scorpius perhaps less trustworthy than they all assumed? After all, he had, at least for a time, worked with his now deceased grandfather, Lucius Malfoy, in a plot that would have resulted in the death of his sister, Lily. Scorpius claimed, of course, that he had not been aware of that part of the plot. But was he telling the truth? Was he perhaps even now still lying about his loyalties?

James pressed his lips together with resolve and turned to the staircase. Tonight, finally, he meant to find out.

The common room was dark and seemingly empty, lit only by the ruddy glow of the fire. James skirted the sofa and chairs, heading toward the portrait hole. Just before he reached it, however, his foot struck something heavy, sending him sprawling to the floor in a messy heap.

“Ow!” a voice hissed.

“Who’s that?” James whispered harshly, scrambling around under the cloak, his foot still encumbered by whatever had tripped him. A hand scabbled at the cloak and yanked it off him.

“James!” a girl’s voice rasped in annoyance.

James blinked in the darkness. “Lil? What are *you* doing up?”

“None of your business!” his sister proclaimed haughtily, stiffening. “I should be asking you the same thing! And using Dad’s

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cloak, too! He will completely murder you when he finds out you've nicked it again!"

James rolled his eyes. "How many times do I need to explain, I *didn't* nick it this time. How'd you know it was me?"

Lily gave an exasperated sigh. "I heard your big feet clomping down the stairs but didn't see anyone. It was either a clumsy ghost or you under dad's cloak again."

A giggle emanated from behind the couch.

"Who's that?" James demanded, clambering to his feet. "What is this?"

"Oh, that's Chance," Lily grinned. "Come on out, it's just James."

A head of curly brown hair poked over the sofa. James recognized first year Chance Jackson, one of Lily's new friends.

"Look," he announced firmly, yanking the invisibility cloak away from Lily. "I don't know what you two are up to--"

"Us *three*, you mean," a boy's voice amended as a second head appeared over the couch. It was Stanton Ollivander, a sleep cap tugged down over his head, completely obscuring his hair.

James glared at him. "Fine," he admitted curtly. "I don't know what you *three* are up to, but it's late and all of you should very much be in bed."

"Who are you to talk?" a muffled voice countered. "*You're* out of bed, aren't you?"

James glanced at the three faces in turn. "Which one of you said that?"

"I did," the muffled voice answered stubbornly.

"Oh come on out, Marcus," Lily sighed. "It's only James. He can't do anything to us."

A third head appeared, this one from beneath a chair on James' left. Marcus Cobb peered up at him, his dark hair tousled into a bird's nest, his green eyes sober in the darkness.

"Look," James gestured in annoyance, "just how many of you are there, anyway?"

"Well," Lily admitted, raising her hand and counting off on her fingers. "Besides the four of us, there's Shivani, who is still upstairs putting on her makeup because she's a silly vain thing who thinks we might just run into a handsome vampire along the way and wants to look

all pretty, and Penelope Bones was going to come, too, but she chickened out at the last moment and pretended to be asleep no matter how hard I shook her. So that's pretty much it-- a little night-time dare out to the greenhouses and back, perhaps with a stop at the kitchen for a bite. And what are *you* doing up and about all by yourself, big brother?"

James rallied and raised his chin. "Maybe I'm keeping an eye on *you*, little sister, making sure you don't do anything foolish."

Lily nodded. "Right. And maybe I'm the queen of bloody England."

On the couch, Chance Jackson giggled again, covering her mouth with both hands.

"You can't do anything to us," Marcus announced, still staring up at James from beneath his chair. "You're not a prefect or Head Boy or anything. Besides, you're always out sneaking around after lights out. You can't have all the fun."

"I'm not out having fun!" James hissed. "I'm... look, this is serious business. I can't tell you about it."

"Ooo!" Stanton hooted eagerly. "Are you on a new adventure? Cameron says--"

"Cameron says a lot of stuff," James interrupted, raising both hands. "The answer is no. You can't come with me, and you need to get back upstairs to your dormitories. It isn't safe to be out in the halls at night. You might run into..."

Lily cocked her head. "Might run into who? Or what?"

"Never mind," James deflated slightly. "Just trust me, all right? Not tonight. I can't risk you getting caught by Peeves or Filch and ruining everything. Tomorrow, sneak around all you want. I don't care if you get caught then."

Lily stared speculatively at James for a long moment. Behind her, Shivani Yadev appeared from the spiral staircase, her dark eyes made smoky by a layer of heavy eye shadow. She stopped when she saw James, her brow lowering.

"You asked your *brother* to come along?" she inquired with obvious disdain.

"No," Lily smiled. "He's got his own plans. Let's go."

The four younger students began to converge on the portrait hole.

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“No!” James rasped, jumping to get ahead of them. “I’ll... I’ll tell on you!”

“You *wouldn’t*,” Lily cocked her head, stopping in front of James.

“I would. Look, I don’t care what you do. Just not tonight. All right? Come on, Lil.”

She narrowed her eyes at him in annoyance. Finally, she sighed briskly. “Fine. On one condition.”

“What?”

“I keep the cloak.”

James boggled at her. “*What?! But Dad--*”

“*And tomorrow you have to tell us what you are up to.*”

“Yeah!” Stanton agreed heartily.

James stammered. “But...! Wait, that’s *two* conditions!”

Lily crossed her arms. “Take it or leave it. Besides, a big fourth year like you doesn’t need an invisibility cloak to sneak around at night, does he?”

James exhaled in frustration. “Fine!” Angrily, he shoved the cloak toward his sister. “But I get it back when I need it, understand? This is serious business! Dad said so!”

“And we can’t wait to hear *all* about it,” Lily nodded, accepting the cloak with a small, triumphant smile. “All right, everyone, I guess tonight its back to bed for us.”

“What?” Shivani complained stridently, gesturing toward her immaculately made-up face. “It took me twenty minutes to put all this on!”

“All dressed up and no place to go,” Marcus nodded mournfully. “And all those lonely vampires out there just waiting for you.”

“We’ll try again tomorrow night,” Lily soothed, leading Shivani and Chance back toward the girls’ stairs. “And tomorrow we’ll have *this!*” She held up the invisibility cloak. “Not even Mr. Filch will catch us if we all cram underneath. It’ll be worth the wait.”

Fuming, James watched as Lily retreated up the girls’ dormitory stairs. She was right: he didn’t really need the invisibility cloak to sneak around. Still, it galled him that she had successfully extorted it from him. Clearly, the Potter propensity for shenanigans didn’t stop with the boys. Shaking his head with irritation, James turned toward the portrait hole and slipped out.

Outside the corridor windows, the rain continued to fall in a steady curtain, blotting out the moonlight and reducing the halls to near-total darkness. James felt his way toward the staircase, knowing he could not afford to light his wand for risk of alerting the skulking Scorpius. His only hope was to spy the boy out without being noticed.

Lightning flickered silently beyond the Heracles window, throwing the staircase into stark contrast for one brief second. James crept down to the entrance hall, and then paused, listening as hard as he could through the steady thrum of the rain and the occasional creak of the dark castle and the shifting staircases. He could neither hear nor see any sign of the wandering Scorpius. He looked around impatiently. If only he had the Marauder's Map! For a moment he considered trying to summon his dad by Floo network and asking him if he would locate Scorpius for him, but that would mean going back to the common room and hoping his father was still awake, not to mention willing to help James on his personal errand of suspicion. More likely, his dad would simply tell him to let Filch handle it and to get himself back into bed. Frustrated and annoyed, James sighed harshly.

A shadow suddenly moved in the archway at the end of the entrance hall. A light appeared, held aloft by a shadowy hand.

"Indeed you are right, my sweet," a grating old voice muttered. "Someone has been careless. Quite careless indeed."

James' heart suddenly pounded in his ears. It was Filch, accompanied by his ancient cat, Mrs. Norris. As quietly as he could, James clambered backwards onto the stairs and hid behind the balustrade. He could see the light from Filch's lantern growing brighter on the stone floor as the man approached, his boots knocking hollowly. A shadow elongated in the lantern-light, and then was punctuated by the shape of Mrs. Norris herself, her head lowered, the fur on her back standing up in rough hackles. James shrank back against the steps, trying to press into the ever diminishing shadow of the balustrade.

Suddenly, to James' relief, the cat turned away, darting toward the doors of the Great Hall. James glanced up at them and saw that they were cracked open slightly, showing a narrow band of darkness.

"We can't have this, can we, my sweet?" Filch growled, following the cat, leaning heavily on an old, gnarled cane. "Not with all those dodgy cabinets lined up like pretty maids in a row, just begging for

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mischievous. The headmaster would not be pleased, would he? No, methinks he would not. Someone's head will surely roll."

James shuddered. Something about the black assurance in Filch's voice implied that his words were not mere idle jest. As Filch heaved the doors closed and locked them, James crab-walked backwards up the steps and around the corner of the lower landing. Another flash of lightning painted the stairs in bright colours from the stained glass window, this time accompanied by a crack of thunder.

Mrs. Norris spun her bullet head toward the stairs, her eyes narrowed, her ears pressed back against her skull. James gasped, pulling his feet back just in time. Beneath the sound of the rain, he fancied he could hear the high purr of the cat's growl.

"Don't you fret, my sweet," Filch sang, his voice unsettlingly cheerful. "It's a new day, it is. Even your old master has a few tricks up his sleeve now, doesn't he?" He chuckled to himself, making a sound like gravel in a rusty cauldron. James' hair stood up at the base of his neck.

Then, for a long, disconcerting minute, Filch was quiet. James could only see a narrow corner of the entrance hall floor from his hiding place. It was still lit with the yellow light of Filch's lantern, bobbing slightly as the man seemed to prowl around, shuffling and tapping his cane. Every shuffle and tap seemed to grow teasingly closer.

And then, with a long creak and grunt, Filch began to climb the stairs.

There was nowhere else for James to go; the stairs behind him were too high to clamber up before Filch found him. He pressed backwards, felt the steps dig into his back as the lantern light grew brighter before him, spreading across the floor of the landing. The shadow of Mrs. Norris trotted into view. She was still growling, deep and high in her feline throat.

Suddenly, a curtain of cool fabric dropped over James from behind, momentarily blocking his view, he startled but thankfully didn't cry out. The fabric was all too familiar, after all, even if he couldn't explain its sudden appearance. The invisibility cloak fell over his knees as a small figure clambered close behind him, clutching him tightly around the shoulders.

Mrs. Norris appeared on the landing in front of James, freezing in place just as the cloak settled over him. Filch climbed slowly into view behind her, clacking his cane on each stair and wheezing to himself.

“Let’s just take a peek along the second floor corridors, shall we, my dear?” he suggested. “The headmaster will be more pleased if we can bring him the responsible party. Of course, it may well have been a careless house elf. But we can hope, can’t we?”

Again, the subtle, black glee in Filch’s voice chilled James. He hoped his toes were fully covered by the cloak. Behind him, the small figure breathed in his ear in short, shallow bursts, clutching him in a death grip.

Mrs. Norris sniffed the air, seeming to peer right through the invisibility cloak. Then, as Filch reached her on the landing and nudged her impatiently with his cane, she trotted up the stairs, passing close enough to James and his benefactor to nearly brush them with her tail. Filch followed, staying thankfully in the centre of the stairs, his gnarled cane knocking close enough to James’ shoe that it pinched a fold of the invisibility cloak.

James held his breath, as did the small figure behind him. He knew who it was, of course, and his relief at her appearance was only slightly greater than his annoyance at her duplicity. A minute later, as the light of Filch’s lantern and the knock of his boots receded into the second floor corridor, he threw off the cloak and turned on the spot.

“You hopeless little sneak!” he hissed.

“You owe me big for that one, Big Brother,” Lily whispered, her face exceedingly pale in the dimness. She was clearly shaken by their close call, but also obviously exhilarated by it. Her face broke into a wild grin. “That was *crazy* intense, wasn’t it?”

“It’s not funny!” James rasped. “That was seriously too close for comfort. What are you doing here?”

“You mean besides saving your skinny bum?” she answered, still grinning nervously. “Seeing what you’re up to, of course. I followed you out almost as soon as you left.”

“But,” James shook his head in exasperation. “I promised I would tell you tomorrow!”

“I figured you’d just make something up. I followed you to keep you honest.”

James sighed and slumped on the stairs. “So I don’t suppose there’s any way I can send you back to bed now, is there?”

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“I doubt it,” she answered cheerfully. “Besides, seems like you need the invisibility cloak after all. Really, I thought you’d be better at this by now. This thing’s made you careless.”

“Sod off,” James muttered, climbing to his feet. “Just stay close and keep up. I’m not telling you anything. Just don’t get us caught, understand?”

Lily giggled manically as she clambered up after James, tossing the cloak over her shoulders but leaving her head out, seeming to float in the air behind him.

“So what happens if we do get caught by Mr. Filch?” she whispered as they descended into the entrance hall. “I hear that he likes to torture late night wanderers with thumb screws and the, er, Iron Maiden. Or something.”

“Those are just First Years’ stories,” James answered curtly. “If you get caught, you get Detention. It’s usually something tedious and disgusting. But it is true that if Filch had his way, it would be loads worse.”

“So what are we doing?” she pressed, following so closely behind him that she bumped him as they turned a corner. “Is it dangerous? Are there bad Slytherins involved? Does Albus know about them? Maybe we should get him to come along as well, eh? I hear their dormitory is right under the lake, with windows that look up into it. Ooh! Can we go look?”

“Lil, shut it, will you?” James hissed back at her. “This isn’t a bloody pleasure cruise! I can’t hear anything with you yammering away at me!”

“What are we listening for?” She breathed, unperturbed. “Are we following somebody? That’s it, isn’t it!”

“Shhh!”

They stopped as they neared the old rotunda. Torches flickered there, filling the round room with orange light. From the corridor, James could see the broken remains of the ancient founders’ statue. Shadows seemed to move on the wall.

“Someone’s in there!” Lily whispered shrilly in James’ ear, clutching his shoulder again.

He shook his head. “It’s just the torchlight flickering. There’s nobody—”

The words caught in his throat as a pair of dark figures darted past the broken statue. The figures were robed from head to toe, hiding their shape and size. A moment later, a push of cool, misty air ruffled the tapestries in the corridor. Unseen, the rotunda door creaked slightly, then clunked shut.

“You were saying?” Lily whispered.

James shook his head. “Stay close, and stay under the cloak,” he instructed. “If there’s trouble, you come straight back and try to raise Dad by Floo. If we’re lucky, he’s watching all of this on the Marauder’s Map anyway.”

Lily nodded. “Hi dad,” she whispered with giddy nervousness.

Together, they crept toward the rotunda. James realized he had his wand in his hand, having instinctively reached for it the moment he saw the mysterious figures. That was probably overkill, of course. It was probably just Scorpius and another student; a Slytherin, perhaps. Still, James couldn’t quite bring himself to pocket his wand again, or even to lower it from the alert, defensive position, held out before him, pointed low.

The rotunda was ruddy orange with torchlight. The broken statue, showing only the feet and lower legs of the founders, cast a dancing shadow high up onto the walls. Across from it, the huge, ancient double doors looked a hundred feet high.

James stopped, suddenly feeling cold to his toes.

“Lil,” he whispered without turning. “You need to go back. You shouldn’t be here.”

“I can’t,” Lily answered stubbornly, pressing up against James again, peeking over his shoulder.

“I’m serious,” James insisted, turning to look back at her. “This is no place for you. You’re too young. You barely know which end of your wand points out, much less how to use it. It isn’t safe.”

“I’m serious, too, James!” she whispered, and James saw that his sister’s face had gone very pale. “I can’t go back by myself unless you come with me.”

James understood. She was frightened. With the appearance of the mysterious robed figures, the adventure had turned from a harmless midnight romp into an all-too-real danger. Lily was frightened to retreat back through the huge castle all alone on a stormy night. Remembering what had happened to him on first night, James could not blame her.

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“All right, Lil,” he said, taking his sister by the shoulders. “Stay right behind me, and keep the invisibility cloak over you the whole time. Don’t take it off for any reason. All right? We’re just going to peek outside and see what’s what. It’s probably nothing. It’s probably just Scorpius Malfoy getting up to no good with some Slytherin mate of his.”

“I knew it!” Lily suddenly grinned, covering her mouth with her hands. “Sneaky Slytherins, just like in Dad’s time! And a Malfoy in the middle of it! Ooo! This is so exciting!”

James sighed. He gestured impatiently and Lily pulled the cloak up over her head, vanishing completely.

With a nod, James turned and crept toward the rotunda entrance. A smaller, human-sized door was set into the much larger door on the right. James unlatched it and a gust of wind pushed it open against him, bringing with it a rainy mist and the sounds of the stormy night. Lily clutched James from behind, hard.

Again, a sense of cold dread fell over James. He swallowed it, and then stepped through the door into the dark, Lily on his heels.

The rain had diminished to a heavy patter. Shimmering curtains fell from the ramparts and roofs all around, but once the two stepped out into the courtyard the drops were fat and sparse. Wind pushed across the walled yard, ruffling the weeds and moaning in the unseen trees of the Forbidden Forest. James looked around, straining his eyes against the dark. There, far off to the right, a flicker of wand-light bobbed and vanished, as if hooded in the bearer’s sleeve.

“This way,” James muttered, tugging Lily along behind him. She stayed close as they wended their way toward the low stone wall and through the open gate. A flash of lightning lit the clouds, turning the black landscape into a pale photograph. In the distance, Hagrid’s barn stood stark against the night, framed against a tableau of dripping trees. A split second later, darkness engulfed it again, even thicker than before.

“Where are we going?” Lily whispered, her feet squelching in the grass.

James shook his head, straining to see through the darkness without his glasses. There were no more flickers of wand light in the distance but the occasional flash of lightning showed that they were nearing the Quidditch pitch.

Lily should not have come with him. The certainty of this sank into James like an icicle. It was too dangerous for her. He didn’t know

how he knew, but he knew. It was his job to protect her. That's what his father had said. And yet, here they were, out after dark on a stormy night, following a pair of mysterious figures into the unknown.

"You shouldn't have come along," James muttered. "It's too dangerous. You should have stayed back where it was safe." He shook his head dourly. "I should have stopped you, Lucy."

Lily suddenly stopped walking. There was a shuffle as she tugged the cloak from over her head, revealing her strawberry-blonde hair and pale face in the darkness. "What did you just say?" she asked, her voice hushed.

"I said you should've stayed where it was safe!" James repeated impatiently, turning back. "It's too dangerous. I shouldn't have let you come along."

Lily merely looked at him in the darkness, and James knew why. He just didn't want to admit it.

He had called her Lucy.

He stepped back toward his sister and raised the cloak back up over her head. "Stay hidden," he said brusquely. "We'll just go back. Together, all right? This was... a mistake. Besides, it's probably nothing."

As if to counter this statement, behind James, a loud clunk echoed out of the darkness. There was a sudden babble of low voices in the near distance, indistinguishable against the wind and moaning trees.

"There are more of them!" Lily gasped, battening onto James' arm in fear. "There're over there! On the Quidditch pitch!"

James nodded, turning, his eyes wide. He wished for another flash of lightning to illuminate the pitch and reveal its secrets, but the storm was abating and the night was seamlessly black. Unconsciously, he began to inch forward again, bringing Lily with him. He sensed the house grandstands looming over him now, heard the snapping flutter of their banners high above.

From the centre of the pitch, more voices came on the wind, hushed and strangely excited. There seemed to be several of them, almost a small crowd. James crept close to the nearest grandstand and strained his eyes, fancying he could see a dark blot of robed figures milling in the grass of the centre line. Another dull clunk sounded. A hushed laugh. A rustle and flap of fabric.

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A sudden green light lit the robed crowd. It rocketed upwards like a firework, or like a spell shot from a wand. Its light spread dimly over the pitch, illuminating no less than twenty robed figures, most carrying brooms, all craning their heads back to watch. Icy dread settled over James as the greenish light fired higher into the air. He reached instinctively for Lily, gathered breath to tell her to run, to run as fast as she could back to the castle.

Before he could speak, however, something poked him in the back, a wand, held firm and steady.

James spun around, knocking the wand away with his elbow. He brandished his own wand wildly, pushing the invisible shape of Lily aside and tripping backwards onto the mushy field. Lightning flickered once more, bathing the pitch with its bony light, and James found himself wand to wand with one of the robed figures, James on his backside on the grass, his right arm pointed up and out, ramrod straight, wand in fist. The robed figure's head was uncovered, showing a length of wavy blond hair and an unexpectedly familiar face.

James boggled up at him as the lightning flickered, not sure if he believed what he was seeing. "Zane?" he barked.

The blond boy rolled his eyes and pocketed his wand. "It's about time you found us," he said. "I was beginning to think you'd never catch on. And your guys *really* need some fresh blood. It's stopped being any challenge at all."

"Keep talking, Walker," a female voice called from the pitch. "If only you were as good on a broom as you are with your mouth."

"Is that Willow?" James asked, confusion slowly replacing dread as he climbed back to his feet.

"Is that James?" Willow Wisteria called, approaching out of the darkness. "About time you showed up. I was beginning to think we'd need to leave you an engraved note and a trail of breadcrumbs."

"I don't..." James stammered, looking around as more students gathered around him, shaking their heads with wry amusement. "I thought... the green light! I thought it was...! What are you...?"

Scorpius Malfoy approached James, his head cocked to one side and a sardonic grin curling his lip. "You thought we were old school Deatheaters, perhaps? Firing off the dreaded Dark Mark for kicks and grins?"

There was a scattering of hushed laughter. Above the heads of the gathered students, the greenish light bobbed and zoomed, trailing a faint tail of sparks. James looked up at it and finally saw it for what it really was. It was a Golden Snitch, its tiny wings enchanted with green light, glowing like a hyperactive lightning bug against the dark clouds.

“Well, Potter, you’ve finally found us out,” Scorpius said, obviously enjoying James’ complete confusion, “and therefore you may officially join us. If you dare. And if you are good enough. Welcome,” he announced, spreading his arms, “to Night Quidditch.”

Next to James, a sudden rustle of fabric revealed Lily’s head, her eyes boggling with delight, her reddish-blond hair mussed into a strew around her flushed face. “*This*,” she exclaimed in a barely hushed squeal, “is the coolest... thing... *ever!*”



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6. THE NIGHT LEAGUE

Zane gave James a quick rundown of how Night Quidditch worked. “Basically, it’s three parts Quidditch, one part Clutch, and a dash of complete insanity,” he said, leading James toward the centre of the dark pitch. An open trunk bucked slightly on the grass as three dully glowing Bludgers strained at their straps. In the middle of them, an old leather Clutchcudgel ball shimmered with pale purple light.

“Night Quidditch only fields five people per team-- two Chasers, one Beater, a Keeper and a Seeker. We play with three Bludgers, though, just to keep it interesting,” Zane pointed out, indicating the trunk. “Scoring is done with a Clutch, which is a little smaller than a Quaffle and lots easier to carry in the dark. You can use any duelling spells you want on your opponents, which sounds worse than it is, since it’s too dark to aim properly and you’re just as likely to hit your own teammate as anyone else. And most importantly, the Snitch is only worth fifty points.”

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“What?” James exclaimed, his head spinning as all around him, robed players began to lift off into the air, their black robes flapping wetly in the wind. “Why only fifty points? That’s a hundred points less than regular Quidditch!”

“Exactly,” Zane nodded firmly. “In regular Quidditch, the whole match rides on the Seeker. The rest of the team can rule the day, score up a storm of ringers, but if the other team’s Seeker grabs the Snitch, it barely even matters.”

“But that’s where strategy comes in!” James insisted. “That’s why the leading team’s Seeker prevents the other Seeker from grabbing the Snitch until the score is high enough to prevent a win! It’s just basic Quidditch tactics!”

“Night Quidditch isn’t about strategy,” Willow Wisteria chided, bumping James playfully with her elbow. “It’s about bashing as many goals home as possible and not getting your teeth knocked out in the process. You up for it, or do you maybe have a pressing appointment in New Amsterdam? We could always go wake Lance Vassar, see if he wants to play.”

James looked at her in confusion. “You mean you want me to play? Like, tonight?”

“I wouldn’t say we *want* you to play,” Willow shrugged, kicking off into the dark air. “But Aloysius took a Bludger to the wrist last match. He’s still too sore to hold onto a bat. We need a substitute Beater for the night. Are you in or not?”

James blinked. Everything was happening so fast, and so wildly different than he expected. “I... sure! I just... I’m not really dressed for it. And I don’t have my broom with me or anything.”

“Hey Arnst!” Willow called softly across the pitch. “Hand over your robes and bat to James. He’s in for you tonight.”

Still on the ground, Aloysius gave an affronted look, magnified by his thick spectacles. “What? No chance! I can still play! I’m ambidextrous! Look!” He swung his bat wildly with his left arm, nearly bashing himself in the ear with it.

Willow shook her head firmly. “Sorry, Arnst. Let’s see what James can do. If he can’t hold up, we’ll sub you in later.”

“Fine,” Aloysius spat angrily, stripping off his robe and revealing a set of burgundy striped pyjamas. “But he can’t have my broom! I’ve got

it tuned just the way I want it and I don't want him getting it all out of balance."

James accepted the boy's robes and began to shrug into them. They were much too large and seamlessly black.

"So what am I going to ride?" he asked, his voice muffled as he struggled into the robes. "I can't sneak back and get my Thunderstreak. Filch is on the prowl tonight, just looking for someone to drag to the headmaster."

Zane sighed. He looked at James appraisingly, and finally said, "This is against my better judgment, you know. After all, you're on the other team. And I'm still pretty peeved at you."

James frowned. "I know. I wanted to talk to you about that--"

Zane stuck up a hand. "Not now. And I'm not sure talking will fix it anyway. I don't know what your problem with Nastasia is, but my advice is that you just keep it to yourself from now on. We've been through a lot, James. But Nastasia's my girl."

James shrugged, his cheeks heating with a mixture of anger and some other, unidentifiable emotion. "I'm not sure she's anyone's girl, if you ask her."

"What?" Zane asked, raising his eyebrows provocatively.

"Nothing. Nevermind. Night Quidditch, remember? What am I going to ride? You have a spare house broom lying around or something?"

Zane narrowed his eyes and pressed his lips into a thin line. A moment later, he turned and stalked away.

"Fine," James muttered to himself. "Be that way."

He looked up, seeking Willow amongst the flitting figures darting like bats over the pitch. As far as he could tell, the match was Gryffindor against Ravenclaw, with Zane slated to play for his old House team. Familiar voices called in hushed tones, mostly sixth and seventh years. James cupped his hands to call up to them when a figure approached him brusquely out of the dark. It was Zane, holding a long, familiar shape in his hands.

"Here," he said curtly. "I don't even know why I brought it. I've been hiding it in the equipment shed ever since first match this year."

James' eyes widened as he accepted the object. It was his Clutchcudgel skrim from the previous year, its black lacquered coat and

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blue flames glinting in the darkness. He ran his hand over its slick shape, suddenly realizing just how much he missed riding it.

“This is actually legal?” he asked breathlessly.

Zane shrugged. “It’s Night Quidditch. Pretty much everything is legal.”

With that, the blond boy mounted his own broom and kicked off, shooting up into the dark mist like a rocket.

“Go, James!” Lily called as quietly as she could, cupping her hands to her mouth. “This is so marvellous! I can’t wait to tell Mum and Dad!”

“The first rule of Night Quidditch,” Willow announced sternly from the darkness overhead, “is we do not talk about Night Quidditch.”

“Ah!” Lily nodded with enthusiastic understanding. “Of course!” She pantomimed locking her own mouth shut, grinning irrepressibly.

James nodded to himself, his head still swimming with this remarkable change of events. With a practiced toss, he flipped his skrim face up onto the ground. It bobbed six inches above the grass and James trapped it there with his right foot.

“Ridiculous,” Aloysius stated matter-of-factly. He looked James in the eye and tossed him his bat. “Don’t kill yourself on that thing, Potter.”

“Thanks for your concern,” James nodded.

“I’m not concerned,” Aloysius rolled his eyes. “It’d just be hard to explain to the headmaster. Now go kick some Ravenclaw tail.”

James hefted the Beater bat and grinned. A moment later, he kicked off from the ground, crouching low over the board and accelerating up into the misty air. He wobbled for only a moment, having not ridden a skrim in many months. Almost instantly, however, his skills flooded back to him. He swooped from side to side, slaloming between players. In the near distance, the Snitch darted wildly, drawing greenish streaks in the air.

“All right!” Aloysius rasped from the centreline below, having assumed the role of referee. “We’ve got six hours of dark, let’s use it well! This is Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw! Winner faces Slytherin next week. And it better be Gryffindor!”

“Just release the game balls, Arnst!” Herman Potsdam called down from the Ravenclaw team. James had seen him in the halls but never spoken to him. The boy was a sixth year, a bit overweight and

awkward looking, not unlike Aloysius Arnst. Apparently, Night Quidditch lent itself to such players. James wondered fleetingly if that fact bode well for him.

“Game on!” Aloysius announced hoarsely, tossing the Clutch into the air and releasing the Bludgers.

James’ grin felt plastered onto his face. He raised the bat, leaned forward over his skrim and launched into the sudden airborne melee.



For the next two weeks, Night Quidditch very nearly pushed everything else out of James’ mind.

The matches were never, ever discussed during the day, but knowing looks would be passed in the halls. Herman Potsdam, for example, gave James a particularly withering glare outside of Arithmancy the week following Gryffindor’s solid nocturnal win over Ravenclaw. Willow Wisteria, normally as aloof and cool as an iceberg to anyone younger than herself, suddenly became very friendly with James, stopping by his table in the library and “accidentally” leaving books of Quidditch history and offensive duelling techniques behind. Even Scorpius seemed more bearable now that they shared the secret.

Slowly, in dribs and drabs, James learned the history of Night Quidditch. It had begun during James’ second year, initiated rather accidentally by Professor Longbottom.

“You know that potion I gave you after your first match?” Scorpius whispered the following Wednesday morning between classes, glancing around furtively as he and James huddled near the ancient statue of Lokimagus the Perpetually Productive

“The sleep thing?” James nodded. “Yeah, sure. I assumed you nicked it from the Potions closet.”

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“Not quite. And it does more than help you skip a night of sleep,” Scorpius said, hunching his shoulders and peering around Lokimagus’ nose. Some distance away, Peeves was painting moustaches on a line of portraits, most of which already had moustaches and complained loudly at the additions. “We brew the potions ourselves, using this really rare plant, Somnambulis, that’s been banned by the Ministry for a whole bunch of boring reasons. Something about wizarding trade agreements with growers in other nations. Rose explained it. I didn’t listen. Point is, some of us found out Professor Longbottom secretly started growing some back during my first year. Trenton Bloch thought it would give us night vision or something. We snuck some, brewed it up with some old potion recipe he found, and ended up awake all night with nothing to do.”

James frowned. “So you just decided to head out to the Quidditch pitch with a collection of glowing game balls?”

“It took us a few weeks to come up with the idea and charm a trunk of old equipment. After that, it was just a matter of sneaking a supply of the Somnambulis and rounding up enough players. It was only supposed to be ten or so players, just enough to field a scratch game. But the whole thing seemed to get a life of its own. People couldn’t help telling other people. Eventually, there was a team for every house. We had to lay down some official rules. One, we never talk about Night Quidditch.” He stopped and glared at James meaningfully.

“Got it,” James nodded gravely. “This conversation never happened.”

“Two,” Scorpius whispered, turning back to Peeves as the poltergeist inched closer, giggling maniacally, paintbrush in hand. “New players can only be added if they learn about Night Quidditch on their own. You, for instance. You got suspicious and followed us out to the pitch, so you’re in. That’s a good thing, too, because it gives us an extra player. Up until now, whenever anyone got injured in a match we were just down a player.”

James nodded silently. Even after only one match, he knew that injuries were inevitable. He himself was still colourfully bruised from a mid-air collision with one of his own teammates.

“The third rule is just sort of an unspoken agreement,” Scorpius muttered, “Nobody from the regular house teams. We don’t want Night Quidditch to end up just being practice for day Quidditch.”

“But Devindar was there,” James whispered. “He plays Keeper, same as during the day.”

Scorpius shrugged. “He got in on it in the beginning. We can’t freeze him out now. Besides, he’s Longbottom’s favourite. He says without Dev on the rings we don’t stand a chance against Beetlebrick and the Slytherins.”

James’ furrowed his brow. “You mean...?”

“Longbottom totally knows about us,” Scorpius nodded, suppressing a wicked smile. “I mean, he does *now*. He caught us sneaking into the greenhouses beginning of last year. We told him everything, and why not? He has his own secret to keep, growing the Somnambulis in the first place. I think he wanted to be really mad at us, but I also think he liked the idea of Night Quidditch from the first time he heard it. He’s even come out to see a match or two.”

“You aren’t serious!” James grinned.

“Indeed I am. He’s pretty cool, really. And he’s dead set on winning the Night League this year, taking it away from Slytherin.”

“I had no idea he was competitive at all,” James mused, still grinning. “He always seems so... sort of daft. In a nice way, of course.”

“You know what they say,” Scorpius said, straightening up. “Longbottom killed the snake, Nagini, back when he was just a student here. Everybody talks about your dad and his final duel with the Dark Lord, but if Longbottom hadn’t done his part first, killing the snake horcrux...”

“Then none of us would probably even be here,” James nodded sombrelly. “The Professor is a... complicated man, isn’t he?”

Scorpius nodded. “Come on, before Peeves tries painting moustaches on *us* next.”

As classes settled into a steady rhythm, James grew slowly accustomed to the sight of the assorted Durmstrang, Alma Aleron, and Beauxbatons students peppering the classrooms. Even the Muggle students from Yorke academy began to find their stride, being mostly relegated to less magic-intensive classes such as Care of Magical Creatures, Potions, and Arithmancy. Lucia, the Muggle girl with whom James shared a class at Beauxbatons and who consistently seemed rather in awe of him (having read the Muggle adaptations of Harry Potter’s stories) showed a surprising skill at potion-making, to the extent that even Professor Heretofore seemed grudgingly impressed. Comstock, however,

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continued to be a rather insufferable complainer, making nothing but enemies at Hogwarts and even annoying such legendarily diplomatic teachers as Professor McGonagall.

“He actually asked if I could turn into anything ‘cool!’” she was overheard exclaiming at the head table one evening during dinner. “I told him, ‘young man, it takes many years to master the art of the animagus’. And he had the temerity to ask me why I chose to invest those years in something as boring as a cat! Not even considering the adaptability and stealth potential of the common feline, much less the difficulty involved with the conservation of mass between forms!”

“We cannot blame our non-magical counterparts for their ignorance, Minerva,” Professor Debellows proclaimed magnanimously. “Such is the purpose of this programme, after all. To show them the realities of our world in preparation for possible integration.”

McGonagall stiffened and opened her mouth to respond, but then appeared to think better of it. James, watching from the Gryffindor table, saw her eyes flit toward the new headmaster, Grudje. As usual, the gaunt man sat silently in the centre of the head table, his fingers steepled, neither eating nor speaking, his eyes roaming coolly over the Great Hall, seemingly deep in thought.

“He creeps me out,” Ralph admitted later that evening. “He never seems to eat. Hardly ever comes out of his office. It’s like he’s hardly even here. He’s a ghost waiting to happen!”

“Not every headmaster can be like Merlin,” Rose muttered. “Or McGonagall. Or Dumbledore, for that matter. The new headmaster just has his own, er, style.”

“Or lack thereof,” Scorpius added.

As the leaves of the forbidden forest began to change colour and drift into piles around the enormous tree trunks, the Wednesday trips to Durmstrang for Practical Prophecy grew colder and colder. James, Zane and Ralph began to wear their heaviest cloaks, keeping them on even during class time in the frosty and cavernous Durmstrang classroom. James tried to pay attention as Professor Avior taught them the fine techniques of organic prophecy, but his haunting similarity to the long dead Headmaster Dumbledore was a constant, growing distraction.

On his third trip to the Durmstrang classroom, James secretly smuggled along a Chocolate Frog card featuring Albus Dumbledore. As Professor Avior led them along the eastern brass balcony, explaining the

properties of each of his strangely magical plants-- his dream inducers, as he called them-- James slipped the Chocolate Frog card from his sleeve and compared it to the professor. The two faces were more than similar: they were virtually- and eerily- identical.

It was an irresistible mystery, and yet James had no clue how to go about solving it. There had to be a connection between Avior and his mysterious, long-dead twin. But what?

As class finished, James followed the Durmstrang students toward the spiral stairs, surreptitiously slipping the Chocolate Frog card back up his sleeve. Something snagged the hem of his robe sharply, nearly tripping him. He stopped, hopping on one foot, forcing Ralph to bump into him.

“Easy,” Zane complained from behind Ralph. “What’s the hold-up?”

James glanced back over his shoulder. “Stupid plant’s attacking me,” he muttered, reaching to yank his robes away from the squat, thorny mass. It stuck stubbornly, snagged on a mass of prickly burs. Impatiently, James yanked harder. There was a crackle and a small knot of burs tore away from the plant, stuck firm to James’ robes.

“Whoa,” Ralph muttered. “The Yuxa finds the person who needs it.”

“What?” James said, frowning down at the ugly brown mass meshed into his robe.

Ralph glanced at him, eyebrows raised. “Remember? First class? Professor Avior told us that each prophecy plant finds the person who most needs to learn its secrets. I’d say you’ve been found.”

James shook his head. “I just got snagged in the stupid thing,”

“I don’t think things like that happen by accident,” Zane said, hunkering down behind James. Carefully, he extricated the mass of burs from James’ robe. Straightening, he held them up to the light. “Ow,” he hissed. “Those are sharp!”

“‘The Question Which Most Vexes You,’” Ralph read aloud, touching the plaque in front of the spiny plant with his toe. “This is in the ‘Mysteries and Answers’ section, isn’t it? This plant is supposed to give you the answer to your most important question. Wow! Which important question, I wonder? You should try it out tonight!”

“What have we here?” a soft voice asked from directly behind James.

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All three boys jumped and turned, looking guiltily up into the face of Professor Avior. The old wizard glared down his nose at Zane, his pale blue eyes glittering in the cold light. With calm sternness he said, "You appear to have Durmstrang property in your hand, young man."

Zane took a step backwards, away from the professor's icy glare. He held out the Yuxa burs, offering them to James. "Yeah. Well, I was just..."

"He was just helping me, sir," James nodded, taking the burs. "They got stuck on my robes. Zane helped me get them off."

Avior's glare remained fixed on Zane. "It is noble of you to assume blame for your friend, Mr. Potter. But misguided. Unlike other schools, theft is a very serious crime within these halls. Especially theft of something as valuable and rare of the Yuxa Baslatma plants."

"He *didn't* steal it," Ralph said nervously. "Really. It got stuck on James' robes. It's like you said, professor: the Yuxa finds the person who needs it. Maybe there's some mystery the plant wants to show James."

Avior's gaze finally ticked toward James, his eyes narrowing. He raised his chin and held out his hand, palm up. James looked down at it, knowing what it meant. With a sigh, he placed the mass of burs in the professor's hand. The fingers closed into a fist, producing a faint crackle as the burs crushed together.

"Ow," Zane winced, remembering how sharp the burs had been.

"In light of your diplomatic status," Avior said quietly, looking closely at James. "I will overlook your attempt to interfere with Durmstrang disciplinary policy. This time. Do not do it again. Mr. Walker," he switched his gaze to Zane, his face hardening. "You are forbidden to return to this school. Your grade will show that you have failed. And please, I implore you, do not challenge me on this. Your situation can only worsen if you do."

With that, Avior turned, his fur-lined robes sweeping over the iron-grate floor. "Be gone with all of you," he called over his shoulder. "Surely you have responsibilities back in your own schools. Volkiev is waiting to escort you back to your cabinets."

James, Ralph and Zane began to follow the professor silently, each fuming and angry. James glanced back at Zane as he reached the spiral staircase. Zane refused to look at him. His face was set in a mask of pale rage.

The three boys reached the main floor and angled toward the double doors. Outside, Volkiev watched impatiently with the rest of the exchange students.

“Mr. Potter, if you would be so kind,” Avior said quietly, touching James’ elbow as he approached the door.

James glanced up at him, saw that the professor meant for him to wait. Ralph and Zane passed through the door before him without looking back.

“Go ahead, Mr. Volkiev,” Avior suggested airily. “Mr. Potter will catch up to you in a moment. Surely he knows the way by now.”

Outside the door, Volkiev seemed reluctant. He glared at James, his lips pressed into a thin line. Then, with a click of his boot heels and a stiff bow, he turned and stalked away, leading his charges.

“I am not an unreasonable man, Mr. Potter,” Avior sighed deeply, stepping away from the door and into the frosty light of the classroom. “And yet I operate in a rigid environment. Certain things are expected of me, not only by the administration of this school, but by its students, and yes, after so many years, by myself as well. I am obliged to maintain a certain image. I hope you will not think too poorly of me.”

James watched the professor’s back as he moved into the light of the windows. Feeling slightly emboldened, he said, “Zane didn’t steal anything. I was telling the truth. The plant got stuck on my robes.”

“Mr. Walker does not belong here,” Avior announced dismissively. “I did him a favour by removing him. This school is no place for someone of his... heritage.”

“That’s dark wizard talk,” James muttered, fear and anger mingling in his voice.

Avior turned, looking back at James over his shoulder. He seemed to be smiling bemusedly. The smile crinkled his eyes, making them suddenly warm in the chilly classroom. “You are a very bold young man. Not unlike your father when he was your age.”

James cocked his head. “How would you know anything about my father?”

Avior’s smile softened. “Oh, we all know your father. He is quite famous, after all. I have respect for him. Unlike many in these halls. But this is not why I have detained you.”

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The professor beckoned James forward. Nervously, James approached. Cold pressed against him, emanating from the bank of frosty windows behind Avior.

“The question which most vexes you,” the old wizard chuckled lightly. “You, I believe, are a young man with many vexing questions, are you not?”

James continued to approach Avior. He saw the wizard’s fist closed loosely, apparently still holding the Yuxa burs.

“And yet,” Avior went on, meeting James’ eyes. “I wonder which question is the *most* vexing? It is an important consideration, yes? After all, some of life’s most vexing questions are the ones we might least wish to have answered. Sometimes, the answers can be far more dangerous than the questions.”

James stopped in front of the old wizard. Behind him, the frosty windows glared white, showing hard, snow-capped mountain peaks. The wintry light reduced Avior to a silhouette.

“But I am not an unreasonable man, Mr. Potter,” he said again. “My quarters are not far from here. I have arranged for you to move freely through the school. Come and see me if you wish. I am willing to answer the proper questions. If, that is... you are willing to ask.”

With that, the professor held out his hand, opening his fist. James looked down at his palm, expecting to see the Yuxa burs. Instead, he saw the Chocolate Frog card with Albus Dumbledore’s face smiling benignly up at him, identical to the face of the wizard holding it.

James glanced up at Avior again. A shiver coiled down his spine, shaking him. Avior nodded slightly, offering the card. Tentatively, James took it.

Avior nodded again, resolutely, as if their business was concluded. “Hurry along, young man. Your classmates are nearly to the cabinets now. You may still catch them.”

James turned and hurried away, eager to get out of the cold classroom, out of the presence of the strange, eerie wizard. He was just passing through the double doors, into the relative warmth of the corridor, when Avior’s voice echoed to him once more, stopping him.

“It would be best, Mr. Potter,” he said calmly, almost kindly, “if you did not tell your father about this. Harry might be a bit... *conflicted*.”

James shivered again. He didn’t answer. Instead, he turned and ran from the room, weaving through clusters of stony-faced Durmstrang

students, carrying the chill of the classroom with him like a haunting ghost.



On the Monday before the Night Quidditch match against Slytherin, Rose passed James a note in Transfiguration class. He unfolded the parchment carefully and peered down at it under his desk.

Meet after dinner in the Owlery. Tell no one. Do not be followed. Check the box next to your name if you will be there.

Across the bottom of the note were the names *Ralph, Zane, Nastasia, Rose, Scorpius* and *James*. Except for James, each name was check-marked with red ink. Beneath James' name, Rose had added the words *Bring parchment and ink!*

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, James tapped his quill with his wand, turning the ink red, and scratched a check-mark next to his own name. Then, after a moment, he added: *real secret societies don't print every members name on their notes.*

He refolded the parchment and levitated it carefully to Rose in the row ahead of him, tapping her lightly on the back of the head with it. She snatched at it impatiently. While Professor McGonagall assisted Fiona Fourcompass with a half-transfigured apple/boot hybrid, Rose unfolded the note and read it. She glanced back at James with a brief, withering look, and then made the note vanish in a puff of silent flame, being sure to let him see it.

To the untrained eye, dinner in the Great Hall was the same as normal, with perhaps just a bit more unusual boisterousness between tables. From the Slytherin side of the Hall, Nolan Beetlebrick made

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rather unnecessarily provocative faces at Devindar Das at the Gryffindor table. Willow Wisteria, on the other hand, made suspiciously loud comments about Slytherin Fiera Hutchins' clumsiness when she mysteriously dropped an entire platter of buttered rolls. James had the distinct impression that Willow had jinxed Fiera with a carefully concealed wand.

At the Hufflepuff table, several faces watched these interactions with unusually bright, albeit silent, interest. James knew that some of the Hufflepuff Night Quidditch players would be sneaking out to the pitch that night to observe the match, keenly interested in who they would be playing in their own sudden death tournament slot. There was a palpable tension in the air, augmented by the total secrecy that kept it hidden from the rest of the school.

At the head table a sudden whooping noise erupted for the fifth time, producing an annoyed grunt from Professor Heretofore. She once more dug in her robes for her pocket Sneakoscope. Unable to quiet the shrieking mechanism, she finally smacked it to the table and fired a bright orange curse at it. The Sneakoscope squawked loudly and fell silent.

Next to her, Professor McGonagall frowned out over the assembly of students, suspicion etched on her face. She exchanged a word with Professor Longbottom, who laughed a bit too shrilly in response. Behind and above them, the monstrous five-faced clock gonged the hour, summoning students to their evening classes beyond the vanishing cabinets. Lily stood in line before the Alma Aleron cabinet along with several of her new friends. As James watched, Zane and Nastasia suddenly stepped out of the cabinet, startling the line of first years. Lily smiled at Zane in surprise and watched the two Americans walk past, hurrying into the Great Hall.

"James," Rose called from further down the Gryffindor table.

James saw her wiggling her eyebrows at him sternly. He pushed his plate away and stood up. "I'm going, I'm going. I have to run up to the dormitory first for some parchment and ink."

"Shhh!" Rose hissed at him fiercely. She stood, turned on her heel, and swept away toward the open double doors.

James exited the hall himself and ran up the stairs to the Gryffindor common room. Five minutes later, changed out of his school robes and carrying his parchment, quill and ink, he ducked through the portrait hole and headed toward the Owlery. On the way, he passed a

long, dark corridor, pausing at the sight of a pair of ghosts flitting slowly in the distance. It was Cedric Diggory and the Grey Lady floating slowly, shoulder to shoulder. James considered calling a hello, but they were quite far away and he was in a hurry. He darted on, wondering briefly about the possibility of romance in the afterlife.

As usual, the Owlery was pungent with the smell of owl feathers, guano and mouse carcasses. It was quite cold inside, with a pale half-moon shining through the open windows. As James entered, he saw the others gathered in the centre of the floor, huddling against the late autumn chill.

"It's about time," Scorpius complained. "It's right cold up here. And some of us have *things* to do."

Rose frowned. "Oh, don't act all cryptic. Everybody knows about Night Quidditch and the big match tonight. You'll have plenty of time to pretend to go to bed and sneak out to try to kill yourself in the dark. This, on the other hand, is important."

"What's Night Quidditch?" Ralph asked, glancing around.

Scorpius' nostrils flared and he jammed his fists onto his hips, staring daggers at Rose.

"So what's this about?" James asked, joining the huddle. "What does it have to do with all of us?"

Rose pressed her lips into a thin, pale line, meeting James' eyes. "It's simple," she said quietly. "It's time we all started working together again." She looked around at the others, each in turn. "Because James is right. Something is going on. Something big."

"Ooo!" Nastasia cooed. "Conspiracy! Adventure! Some crazy made-up Lady of the Lake that nobody but James can see! Actually, come to think of it," she paused and frowned slightly. "I don't care. Can I go home now?"

"Quiet, Nastasia," Zane muttered.

Nastasia demurred easily, hooking her arm around Zane's elbow and hanging on him. She met James' eyes and gave him a big smile.

Ralph dragged a short wooden stool closer with his foot and plopped onto it. "So what is it then, Rose? *Does* it have something to do with James' Lady of the Lake?"

Rose ignored the question. Instead, she produced a sheaf of folded parchment from her knapsack and unfurled it noisily, revealing a mass of notes written in her own neat handwriting. "Hired by Igor

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Karkaroff in the year nineteen seventy-seven for the post of assistant potion master,” she read briskly. “Promoted to head potion master two years later. Named to the board of Durmstrang regents in nineteen eighty-five. Granted lifetime guaranteed professorship six years later. One of three people to chair the movement to re-initiate the Triwizard Tournament...”

“I was bored until that last bit,” Scorpius interjected. “Who are you talking about?”

Rose lowered her parchments. “Avior Dorchascathan, Durmstrang professor of Practical Prophecy.”

“*Him*,” Zane rolled his eyes. “I think I’ve had enough of that old crank to last a million years. I still haven’t told my parents that I already managed to fail a class, *and* not for any of the *usual* reasons.”

“Poor baby,” Nastasia purred, tightening her grip on Zane’s arm. James felt suddenly slightly ill.

Scorpius leaned to peer at Rose’s notes. “Since when are you vetting crotchety old foreign teachers? Did James suck you in with that bit about him being Dumbledore’s evil twin?”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about!” Rose said with sudden ferocity, crinkling the notes in her fists. “Who are you to laugh at what James says? How many times has he just made stuff up? How often has he been wrong when he says there’s some big plot afoot?”

“Well,” Ralph said uncomfortably. “He *was* wrong about Professor Jackson back during the Hall of Elders’ Crossing. Turned out he was a good guy after all.”

“Same with Merlinus in our second year,” Zane nodded.

Rose blew her hair out of her face impatiently. “That’s missing the point. The point is there *were* big scary plots going on. So what if he was wrong about a few of the details?”

“Like the Merlin staff,” Ralph agreed. “He thought it was Tabitha Corsica’s broom.”

Zane brightened. “Or what about when he brought Merlin’s robe right to Madame Delacroix, thinking it was just the Invisibility Cloak? She really pulled a fast one on you there, didn’t she, James?”

“That’s quite a track record,” Nastasia nodded appreciatively.

“Shut up, all of you!” Rose interrupted, her face grave. “The point is, if James says something isn’t right, I, for one, am choosing to believe him. I think he’s earned that.”

“What about the Lady of the Lake?” Scorpius asked calmly. “Like it or not, Nasty here is right. Nobody else has ever seen her. Do you believe James about that?”

Rose met Scorpius’ eyes firmly. “My cousin Lucy is dead. James says that the Lady of the Lake killed her. Are you suggesting that he lied about that? Are you saying that he’s using the death of a twelve year old girl... to get attention?”

Scorpius studied Rose’s face for a long, tense moment. Finally, he looked away. For once, he seemed to have no response. James’ face felt hot with mingled embarrassment and gratitude. He hadn’t realized until this moment just how much it had wounded him not to be believed. He met Rose’s eyes and nodded gratefully at her. She glanced down at the floor. When she looked up again, she shrugged. Perhaps she wasn’t as confident as she seemed, but at least she was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“So,” Ralph said, “If James says there is something dodgy about Professor Avior, then it’s worth looking into, right?”

Rose didn’t answer. Instead, she raised her notes again. “Shortly after Avior was hired as assistant potion master at Durmstrang, a magical summit was held there, attended by Hogwarts and Ministry representatives. Avior did not attend. Apparently he was ill the entire time, confined to his quarters.”

“Couldn’t have happened to a nicer fella,” Zane muttered darkly.

“A few years later, when Avior was a full professor,” Rose went on, “There was a big scandal involving a bunch of vacationing students from Hogwarts, Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. It seems they all showed up in a Muggle fishing village, got into a huge duelling contest and caused all sorts of trouble, levitating boats into the village streets and engorging fish to the size of monsters. The Ministry of Magic called in a whole team of professors from all three schools to help sort it out and determine who to punish. Avior was the one professor all the Durmstrang students had in common, but he refused to come. He claimed to have a ‘family emergency’. The thing is there is no record whatsoever of his family. Not a mother or father. No siblings. Not so much as a single crazy uncle.”

Ralph said, “Well, he’s got to have *some* family, right? I mean, he didn’t just hatch from an egg. Er, unless that happens sometimes in the wizarding world. It doesn’t, does it?”

“What’s the point of all this, Rose?” Scorpius shook his head.

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“In nineteen ninety-four,” Rose went on, raising her voice. “The Triwizard Tournament was held for the first time in nearly two hundred years, due in large part to the efforts of one Avior Dorchascathan. And yet, for reasons no one really knows, the Professor himself *did... not... attend.*”

There was a long pause in the darkness of the Owlery. All around, feathered shapes shuffled. Cold wind pressed through the open windows, ruffling James’ hair.

“So,” Zane finally said, “the old guy’s shy. Or maybe he just doesn’t like leaving Durmstrang castle.”

“That can’t be it,” Rose countered. “He’s left the castle loads of times. In fact, according to some of the Durmstrang students I’ve interviewed, Avior travels very frequently, and for weeks at a time. He definitely has no problem getting out and around.”

Ralph shrugged. “So what’s the big deal then?”

“The big deal,” Rose replied, lowering her voice, “is that Avior is suspiciously absent anytime he might be around people from Hogwarts or the Ministry of Magic,” she turned to James, her face serious. “Anytime he might encounter people who remember *Albus Dumbledore.*”

A shiver completely unrelated to the chill of the room shook James’ shoulders. He glanced around at the others. “After last class at Durmstrang,” he said, “Avior said he would answer my most important question.” He told them about the Chocolate Frog card, and how Avior had used it to show James he knew of his suspicion.

Breathlessly, Rose asked, “Are you going to take him up on the offer?”

James shrugged. “I don’t know. Possibly. I *am* dying of curiosity. If he is willing to just tell the truth straight up...”

Rose shook her head adamantly. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, James. He’s not just going to tell you everything after all these years of keeping secrets. He knows you’re a threat to whatever it is he’s hiding.”

“Rose is right,” Zane said. “He probably means to find out what you know and shut you up somehow. Us wizarding types have lots of ways of doing that. One quick Imperius curse and you’re silenced forever.”

James frowned thoughtfully. “I don’t think so, though. Somehow... I sort of trust him.”

“Just because he looks like Headmaster Dumbledore,” Rose said quietly, “doesn’t mean he’s trustworthy. Maybe it’s just a trick. Maybe... I don’t know. Maybe he’s just using Polyjuice potion.”

“But why?” Ralph interjected. “Why go to all that trouble if it means having to hide yourself from whoever might recognize the person you are trying so hard to look like?”

“No,” James said firmly. “It’s not a trick. That wouldn’t make any sense. Whatever or whoever he is, there is *some* connection between him and Dumbledore. If I can go to his office and just get him to tell me...”

“I’ll come along,” Nastasia suddenly said.

Everyone, including Zane, turned to look at her. She simply smiled mildly, glancing from face to face.

James was the first to ask the obvious. “But... why?”

“Simple,” Nastasia said, disengaging from Zane’s arm. “It’ll let Avior know that you’ve already told more people. Making you disappear won’t keep his secret safe if you’ve already started blabbing it around. Besides,” she shrugged. “I’m curious.”

James shook his head impatiently. “I thought you didn’t care about any of this?”

“Oh, I’m mercurial that way,” she said, crossing over next to him. “Sometimes even I don’t know when I’m going to change my mind about things.”

“But Avior hates Muggle-borns,” Zane said, folding his arms across his chest. “He’ll take one look at your hair and nose ring and, I don’t know, throw you in the dungeon or something.”

“Oh, didn’t you know?” Nastasia cocked her head and smiled crookedly. “I’m one hundred per-cent pureblood witch. From one of the oldest magical families in America, in fact. Why, some of my great, great, great aunts were actually burned at the stake during the Salem witch trials.” She turned to James and whispered in his ear, “None of them were hurt, of course. But they did put on a good show for the Muggles.” She giggled.

“I still think it’s a bad idea,” Rose said, “But Nastasia has a point. If Avior knows that more than just the two of you are onto his secret, it’ll keep you both a bit safer. At least until he finds out exactly who else knows what.”

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“There’s one thing here I don’t understand,” Scorpius announced. “I assumed we were all here because we were the ones who went to New Amsterdam together and encountered that Collector person. We heard the Muggle woman, Lissa, talk about the Morrigan Web. James here asked you to check that out, Rose. Not Professor Avior. How’d this get connected to him?”

Rose nodded meaningfully. “That’s where all this started,” she admitted. “I started looking up the Morrigan Web, just like James asked. It wasn’t easy. Frankly, I was about to give up. Then, somehow, I came across two references, both at the same time. It started with a history of Alma Aleron. The Morrigan Web was a pet project of some American Professor from Igor House over a hundred years ago. She called it the ultimate magical super-weapon, and said that it was so powerful, so devastating, that if it was ever perfected, it would stop magical warfare forever.”

“That…” Ralph frowned thoughtfully, “doesn’t exactly make sense.”

“Sure it does,” Nastasia smiled. “She probably believed that if everyone had a Morrigan Web, no one would ever be crazy enough to use it.” She shook her head and turned to James. “Idealistic people are so cute,” she purred. His face heated again as he tried to ignore her.

To Rose, he said, “Did you find out what it does or how it works?”

“No. I couldn’t get any details at all. It just said that the professor’s experiments eventually got her into trouble with the American magical authorities. They threatened to confiscate all of her tools and imprison her if she didn’t shut down her research on the Morrigan Web. She must have agreed to it, because her name doesn’t come up again.”

“That doesn’t sound like any Igors I know,” Zane said, tilting his head. “What *was* her name?”

Rose consulted her notes. “Professor Principia Laosa. I’ve never heard of her. Certainly she’s long since dead.”

Zane glanced aside at Ralph, then James, his brow furrowed. “Could it be…?”

“What?” Ralph said.

Nastasia suddenly perked up next to James. “Of course! Unless she’s just a legend. Oh, that would be such a shame.”

“What?!” James demanded, nearly hopping with impatience.

“Crone Laosa,” Zane said, shaking his head. “But that’s totally, like...”

“Oh yeah, I remember you talking about her,” Ralph said, standing up from his stool. “She’s supposed to be that really terrifying old witch that haunts the lower cellars of Alma Aleron’s Administration Hall, right?”

Rose looked from Ralph to James in annoyance. “Is this for real?”

James shrugged, remembering. “Admin Hall was built by dwarves, and legend says they included endless layers of tunnels and basements going down who-knows how deep. It’s all off-limits to students. Some people say that the cellars are guarded by a really powerful and creepy old witch, Crone Laosa.”

“But no one’s ever seen her, right?” Ralph asked, looking almost imploringly at Zane. “I mean, she’s just a legend. Like the boogeyman.”

“The Boogeyman’s no legend,” Scorpius interjected. “He tried to get appointed Minister of Magic a few decades ago. Said he’d gotten reformed from all that scaring children in the dead of night stuff.”

“Besides,” Rose said, pushing Scorpius aside and addressing Zane. “She’d be extremely old. Nearly two hundred years.”

Zane shrugged. “Our Chancellor is like two hundred and fifteen or something. Magical types have ways of living way long if they want to. If Crone Laosa really is the old Professor Laosa from Igor House, she’d totally know how to extend her life. Igors are into that sort of thing.”

There was another long, thoughtful silence in the Owlery as everyone considered the ramifications of this.

Finally, James turned back to Rose. “What was the other reference you found to the Morrigan Web?”

Rose looked uncomfortably down at her notes again. “It’s probably nothing, I suppose. But the coincidence was just a bit too much.”

“As if there haven’t been enough coincidences already,” Zane commented. He glanced across the gathering at Nastasia where she now stood next to James.

“In the book about Alma Aleron’s history,” Rose said, ignoring Zane. “When it talked about the Morrigan Web, it referenced an expert on magical doomsday devices and super-weapons. I thought it might be the man that escaped from Azkaban this summer, Worlick.” She glanced

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at James. "After all, he's probably a Warlock, and that's their specialty. Instead..."

James leaned closer as Rose held up her notes. She tapped a name written on the top, underlined three times: *Avior Dorchascathan*.

"Professor Avior?" Ralph said aloud. "He's an expert on magical doomsday weapons?"

Scorpius nodded. "So that's what raised your flags about him. It wasn't just James' suspicions."

Rose shook her head. "It was both," she admitted. "But it does prove that James has a nose for dodgy characters."

"It's a Potter specialty, I suspect," Nastasia said with a sigh.

Ralph ran his hands through his hair. "So where does all of this leave us, then?"

"The important thing," Rose said, refolding her notes, "is that it leaves us on the same page. There is something potentially horrible going on in New Amsterdam. The Collector and his pet Warlock, along with some other person who may or may not be James' Lady of the Lake—"

"She's not *my* Lady of the Lake," James interrupted, annoyed. "I don't keep her on a leash or anything." Next to him, Nastasia giggled again.

"Sorry," Rose amended, not looking at him. "Either way, the Collector and his cronies are possibly creating something really horrible. I think it would be best for us to find out everything we can about it."

James nodded. "And I'll find out what I can about Professor Avior."

"With my help," Nastasia insisted, bumping him with her hip.

"But why did I have to bring this?" James asked Rose, holding up his blank parchment, ink and quill.

"For the same reason we met in the Owlery," Rose said emphatically. "Because this time, *you are writing to your Father*. I've written a letter to my own parents. We need help. Who better to ask than the Ministry's head Auror and the two people who helped him defeat the most evil wizard of all time?"

James glanced aside, saw Nobby ruffle his feathers high on a nearby perch, already eager to go.

"You're right, Rose," James said, squatting to the floor and spreading a parchment on his knee. "This is too serious to handle ourselves."

Rose sighed with obvious relief. She produced an already sealed envelope from her knapsack. “We’ll need to use Nobby to send both letters. We can’t risk interception with any of the house owls. We need to tell our parents everything.”

James nodded, already scribbling carefully on his own parchment. It really was a good idea, and he felt slightly ashamed that he hadn’t already written to his father himself.

But still. He was not quite prepared to tell his father *everything*.



Lily was waiting for James in the Gryffindor common room as he crept downstairs, skim in hand.

“Where’s Scorpius and Dev and everyone else?” she whispered excitedly, jumping to her feet.

James shook his head in annoyance. “We all sneak out separately. It’s safer that way. And what are you doing here? Get yourself back up to bed.”

“Nice try, Big Brother,” she announced, unfazed. She trotted lightly across to the portrait hole and beckoned him forward. “Out with the Invisibility Cloak. I know you’ve got it with you. You’re no good at sneaking around without it.”

James sighed and smiled. Secretly, he liked his sister’s cheerleading, hushed as it had to be. He approached her and shook out the Invisibility Cloak. “How about you lead tonight, Lil,” he prodded, then stopped. “It is just you, right? You don’t have a pile of your first year friends hiding under the furniture to follow us out, do you?”

“No,” Lily said, “But that’s not a bad idea. I’ll try that next time.”

Ten minutes later, the two darted onto the darkness of the Quidditch pitch, joining the others already gathered there. A fat three-

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quarter moon hung low on the horizon, scrubbed with marching clouds so that the pitch glowed with bony moonlight one moment, and then descended into dense shadow the next. Cold wind moaned through the grandstands, whickering in the banners high overhead.

“Almost got nailed by Filch tonight,” Devindar announced, shaking his head. “He and that scruffy cat came around the corner of the third floor arcade just as I was hitting the stairs. I’m almost positive they saw me, but I jumped the bannister before they could catch up.”

Willow swept her blonde hair back, tying it into a ponytail. “Filch won’t catch any of us unless we’re totally dumsy.”

“What if he spies the glowing game balls from one of the castle windows?” Lily asked.

“Already thought of that,” Scorpius answered. “The Bludgers, Clutch and Snitch are all charmed with slow light. It drops off after a few hundred feet. From the castle, the pitch is just as dark as, well, pitch.”

“Scorpius is very proud of that slow light thing,” Dev added. “Technomancy is a fancy of his. It’s all quantum to me.”

“Besides,” Willow went on, mounting her broom. “If Filch ever tried to come out to the pitch, he’d get his cane stuck in the mud and spend the night going in circles.”

Lily laughed at that. To James she said, “I’m going to head up into the stands tonight. Look! We have spectators!”

James frowned and glanced up toward the nearby Gryffindor grandstand. Sure enough, a scattering of figures had collected in the seats. One of them waved down. It was Nastasia. Next to her, Zane sat bundled in a heavy cloak and scarf. Obviously, they had stayed behind after the meeting in the Owlery. Above them, James was almost sure he recognized Professor Longbottom, a large peaked hat pulled low over his brow, hunkered amongst a group of Hufflepuff Night Quidditch players. Without looking back, Lily clumped up the stairs to join them.

“Well, look who the Hinkypunk dragged out,” a voice called overhead.

James recognized the voice but couldn’t quite believe his ears. He glanced up and saw a dark figure hovering twenty feet up, a green scarf fluttering over its robed shoulder. “Albus!” James rasped. “What are you doing here?”

“Writing a Charms essay. What’s it look like?”

“But Night Quidditch isn’t supposed to be open to day players! You’re on the regular Slytherin team!”

“It’s not really a rule, exactly,” Albus shrugged. “Just a sort of guideline. Sorry if you think my presence gives Slytherin an unfair advantage.”

“*Unfair advantage*,” James growled, dropping his skrim and hopping onto it. “I’ll show you unfair advantage.” He leaned hard over the board, curling his fingers over its tip, and rocketed into the air, swooping close enough to his brother to flick his green scarf. The scarf flung around Albus’ face, temporarily blinding him.

“Night Quidditch is a different cauldron of newts from day Quidditch, Al,” James called back. “I hope you’re wearing your big boy underpants tonight.” He swept high into the air without looking back, dropped into a sudden squat and drew a tight, vertical loop, coming to rest next to Willow.

“You’re on Seeker tonight, James,” she said. “Watch out for Beetlebrick. He’ll try to take you out with a well-placed Bludger. Here.” She tossed him a spare beater bat, which he caught deftly. “Just for protection. It’s going to be a rough night, and no mistake.”

“They’re playing Albus,” James grumped, brandishing the bat.

Willow shrugged. “Brother against brother. That’s a little poetic, isn’t it? You won’t go easy on him, will you?”

James glanced at her, shocked at the very suggestion. “You don’t have any brothers or sisters, do you, Willow?”

She shook her head. “How’d you know?”

James hunkered over his skrim, preparing to launch into motion. “I’m psychic.”

A moment later, the Clutch lobbed into the air. Five glowing balls streaked in five different directions, drawing pale lines against the dark. Flying robed shapes collapsed on them, crashing wildly into one another in mid-air. James waited, watching for the narrow green streak of the Snitch. It spun away toward the Hufflepuff grandstand like a supercharged lightning bug. James launched forward in pursuit of it.



The match lasted nearly four hours. In the end, exhausted and bruised, covered in cold sweat, James found himself in a shoulder to shoulder race against Albus for the Snitch. The two bashed each other mercilessly as they sped toward the swooping, glowing streak, James leaning hard over his skrim, Albus craning forward on his broom, his nose only inches above its shaking tip.

The score was two-hundred and thirteen to one hundred and ninety-two, with Slytherin holding onto a slim, constant lead.

“No!” Albus cried, straining forward, his outstretched fingers ready to close on the tiny golden ball.

“It’s mine!” James grunted, urging his skrim ever faster.

Before them, the Snitch ticked back and forth, hurtling through the dark, past the grandstands, out over the trees of the Forbidden Forest.

James balanced on the edge of his skrim, lunging for the fluttering shape. He brushed it with his fingers, felt its whickering wings, and then closed his fist with a snap.

Whump!

Suddenly, inexplicably, the world turned upside down. Black earth and night sky swung around each other, switching places, and James realized dimly that his hand had closed on emptiness. A long narrow shape spun away against the swinging night; his skrim, suddenly separated from his feet. James was floating, falling, tumbling through the dark. Cold wind howling in his ears but all he cared about was that he had missed the Snitch.

“Drat! Drat! Drat! Drat! Drat!” he yelled as he dropped, forgetting for the moment even to be frightened.

Suddenly he was being swatted, swiped repeatedly with springy, prickly shapes. Dully, he recognized the limbs of a large pine tree as they slapped at him, crackling and snapping, slowing his fall. Finally, one particularly large bough caught him, bowed deeply under his weight, and

then sprung upward again, launching James out of the tree. Something broad and flat filled his vision, reaching up to collect him. He crashed into it, through it, and fell flat onto a heavily cushioned surface. Bits of thatch and broken wood peppered him from above, clattering all around. James squeezed his eyes shut against the debris and covered his head with his hands. When the noise subsided, he opened his eyes again only to find himself staring down the length of a long, pink umbrella, its tip pointed directly at his nose.

“James?!” a gruff voice announced in disbelief. “What in th’ ever lovin’ bloody hell are yeh doin’?”

James peered up at Hagrid, realization dawning on him. He had been blasted from his skrim by a Bludger at the very last moment, and had narrowly avoided being killed by a fall over the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He looked up beyond Hagrid, toward the enormous hole in the hut’s thatched roof, and then aside, at the fat bearskin rug he had fallen onto. Bits of broken roof lay all around. As James watched, his skrim dropped almost elegantly through the hole in the roof and thumped onto Hagrid’s table, knocking aside his oversized tea set.



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7. ECHOES OF UMBRIDGE

“**O**ut with yeh!” Hagrid bellowed, hoisting James roughly through the door of his hut. “Of all the ridiculous, hare-brained, irresponsible...!”

“I really am sorry, Hagrid,” James insisted, still trying to keep his voice low. “I just fancied a late night fly! I hit something and fell off. A bird or a bat maybe! Yeah, a bat! A really big one! I didn’t mean to--”

Hagrid shook his massive head and held up both of his slab-like hands. His striped night shirt fluttered in the moonlight. “I don’ wanna hear it! It’s absurd, I tell yeh. Why, if I wasn’t such good friends with yer parents I’d march yeh straight ter the headmaster m’self! As it is, you can bet yer britches I’ll be havin’ a long talk with yer dad about this. Late night flying, for Merlin’s sakes! And on one o’ those daft American scrams of all things!”

“It’s called a skim, actually,” James suggested meekly, glancing down at the board in his hands.

“I don’ care what it’s called!” Hagrid roared, clapping a hand to his unruly hair. “It dumped yeh through m’ roof and nearly killed yeh in

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th' process! How'm I gonna explain this? When'm I gonna have time ter fix it?"

"I could help you, maybe?" James offered, raising his eyebrows hopefully.

"Werrl," Hagrid shook his head, deflating slightly. "Yeh certainly should, I wager. Yeh scared the daylights out o' poor Trife. He's still under th' bed, shivering like a leaf in a storm."

"I could come out this weekend," James suggested eagerly. "Maybe bring a few friends with me? I bet we could get your hut fixed up straight away!"

Hagrid heaved a giant sigh. "All right, all right, then. Off with yeh before I change m' mind. Be here bright n' early Saturday morning. And yeh'd better hope it doesn't rain between now n' then or I'll be in a right nasty mood indeed!"

James nodded enthusiastically. "You got it, Hagrid! Sorry! I've, er, learned my lesson. Really!"

Hagrid waved him on impatiently. "That'll be the day," he grouched, turning back to his hut. A moment later, the heavy wooden door slammed shut behind him, shaking the walls and echoing into the dark.

James turned toward the castle, only now realizing how sore he was from his fall. Scratches smarted on his face and pine needles were matted into his hair. He reached up to shake them out.

"James!" a voice hissed from a nearby bush. "What happened?"

Scorpius clambered out of the bush, followed by Lily, her face very pale in the moonlight.

James gestured vaguely back toward Hagrid's hut. "I fell through the roof. Nearly splattered myself all over the Forbidden Forest."

Scorpius shook his head irritably. "Not that!" he said. "The Snitch! How'd you miss it? Albus and the Slytherins won!"

"I'm fine, actually, thanks for asking," James said pointedly, stalking past. Lily ran to catch up to him and grabbed his free hand.

"Easy for you to say," Scorpius grouched. "If Gryffindor loses the Night League, Longbottom will probably shut us down, Somnambulis or not. The guy loves his plants, but that only goes so far."

"Professor Longbottom guided you down with his wand," Lily said quietly, still gripping James' hand. "He was watching from the grandstands and saw you fall. You were too far away to levitate but he did the best he could. We knew you were all right when Hagrid started

yelling. He went on ahead to make sure the others got straight back to their dorms.”

“What did you tell Hagrid?” Scorpius inquired sullenly.

“I didn’t tell him anything about Night Quidditch, if that’s what you’re asking. The secret’s safe. But I’m going to need your help this coming Saturday morning if you want it to stay that way.”

“Why?” Scorpius demanded, looking askance.

“Let’s just say I hope you know how to handle a hammer.”

Scorpius sighed irritably. “Malfoys have an aversion to manual labour,” he muttered.

The three skulked into the courtyard and ducked through the inset rotunda door. James trembled, tired to the bone, although he knew he would feel greatly refreshed after a draught of Scorpius’ Somnambulis potion, a flask of which he kept hidden in the dormitory.

The halls were eerily still in the pre-dawn darkness. Not a breath of air moved and very few torches were lit. James’ own breathing seemed to echo back at him from the cold walls. Bruised, sore and chilled with sweat, he shivered, dislodging pine needles from his hair. All around them, the castle seemed to stretch off into darkness, creaking and moaning with the wind.

“What was that?” Lily whispered suddenly, clutching James’ arm.

“Nothing,” James answered, although he had heard it, too: a dull thump down a dark hallway. “Just a classroom door blowing shut. Don’t frighten yourself.”

“I’m not frightened,” Lily squeaked. James understood her nervousness. Suddenly, the thought of all the empty, dark rooms lining the corridor weighed down on him. He imagined leering, shadowy shapes behind each keyhole, watching them pass.

Lily tugged on his arm. “Let’s go this way!” she whispered, pointing toward an intersection. Tall stone arches lined the cross-corridor, hung with flickering lanterns.

“It’ll take us longer,” Scorpius complained tiredly. “We’ll come out on the far side of the stairs.”

“It’s worth it,” James said, leading his sister into the light of the corridor. He leaned close to her. “Would you feel better if we ducked under the Invisibility Cloak?”

She shook her head, pressing against him as they hurried along.

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A sudden gust of wind rushed past them, making all three students jump. Paintings rattled all down the corridor and the lanterns flickered wildly. The farthest lantern blew out completely, throwing the end of the corridor into darkness.

“James!” Lily squeaked again, squeezing his arm ever tighter.

“Let up, Lil,” James breathed, staring hard at the dark lantern. “You’re going to cut off my circulation. It’s nothing. Just... just a little wind.”

“In a windowless corridor,” Scorpius added, glancing around behind them.

Lily pointed at the floor in front of them. “Where’s all that water coming from?”

James felt his heart sink as he looked down. The floor was indeed glistening with water. Ripples ran from beneath a distant door, forming a long, murky puddle down the corridor.

“Leak in the bathroom,” James whispered, trying to inject a note of hope into his voice.

Slowly, they began to inch forward again, their feet smacking lightly in the deepening puddle.

Another breath of wind sighed along the corridor, swirling the lantern flames and rattling the paintings. The second-to-last lantern flared, guttered, and fell dark.

“All right,” Lily quavered, “Now I’m frightened.”

James shook his head, frowning deeply. “I’ve seen this before,” he whispered. “It’s just Cedric performing his Spectre of Silence routine. I saw him earlier this evening with the Grey Lady. He did the same thing to Rose, Ralph and me once.”

A third cold gust breathed along the corridor, snuffing another lantern. The far end of the corridor was now a mass of shadows.

“Cedric,” Scorpius rasped through his teeth. “If that’s you, I don’t care if you’re already dead. I’ll find a way to kill you again.”

Another gust, harder than ever, rippled through James’ hair and robes, sighing in his ears. Lily let out a sharp little scream and clutched her head. A chorus of whispers seemed to fill the hall. Half of the remaining lanterns guttered into darkness.

“Cedric?” James called into the shadows, his voice shaking noticeably.

In answer, a fat, ghostly shape swooped through the closed door on James' right. It leered at him, stuck out its tongue and spat a loud raspberry. All three students leapt backwards before they recognized the familiar shape.

"Peeves!" Scorpius cried, barely keeping his voice below a shout. "What is wrong with you?"

"Serves nasty students *right* for being up in the dead of *night*," Peeves replied musically, crossing his arms and jutting his nose in the air.

"But the wind and the whispers!" James gestured around the suddenly dark corridor, shaking with rage. "That's just mean! You scared us all nearly to death with that whole lantern thing!"

Peeves opened one eye and cocked his head curiously at James. "What lantern thing?"

Behind the poltergeist, a glimmering shape suddenly reared up from the wet floor, seemingly made of water. It exhaled harshly, filling the corridor with cold wind, and swiped at Peeves. The Poltergeist shredded away like smoke, leaving only a short, startled screech in its place. The shape lunged forward, solidifying in the darkness, flinging water from its streaming arms. The exhaling breath became a voice.

JAAAAMMESSSSS!!!

Lily screamed again and ran, dragging James with her by the hand. James slipped on the wet floor, stumbled, and fell to his knees.

"Go, Lil!" he called when she stopped, stunned, and looked back at him. "Run to the common room! Go now!"

A cold mist blasted over James' shoulder. Ghostly arms spread around him, seemingly made of water and smoke. The rattling, breathy voice roared again, sounding somehow delirious with joy: *LILLYYYY! I'VE MISSESSED YOOUUU!*

Lily saw the shape behind James and her eyes grew wide. The watery figure seemed to be rising over him. Lily spun and ran, her hair flying behind her. The watery shape blasted over James' shoulder, buffeting him and filling his face with a stinking, misty backwash. He scrambled forward, dropping the Invisibility Cloak to the wet floor. Finally clambering upright, he flung out his arm, aiming his wand at the amorphous figure where it bore down on Lily.

He opened his mouth to fire, having decided-- without even really thinking about it-- on a freezing charm, when a figure bolted into

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sight from a side corridor, skidding to a halt between James and the water creature.

“There we are!” Filch cried triumphantly, pointing at James with his cane. “It’s about time I found you!”

“Get out of the way!” James shouted, still aiming his wand. Behind Filch, the watery shape fell onto his sister, finally assuming a fully solid-- and decidedly female-- shape. Pale arms grabbed Lily, spun her into a smothering embrace.

“Drop your wand!” Filch roared, still pointing his cane at James, his arm vibrating with tension.

James shook his head, still moving forward. “Get down!” he cried. “She’s right behind you!”

“*Oh* no,” Filch shook his head furiously, sighting James down the length of his cane. “I won’t be falling for *that* old trick.”

Behind Filch, the horrible water-woman lifted Lily and passed a hand over her face. Lily went limp in her arms. James couldn’t make out the woman’s features with Filch in the way, but he had a horrible idea of who it must be.

“Lily!” James called desperately, raising his wand to fire over Filch’s shoulder.

“*Expeliarmus!*” Filch roared, so loud that spittle flew from his lips. A bolt of red light spat from the end of his cane and James’ wand wrenched out of his hand. It struck the ceiling and clattered to the floor twenty feet away.

James boggled at the old man, stunned in spite of everything. Filch was a Squib! Squibs couldn’t do magic!

Filch grinned, obviously enjoying James’ shock. “*Immobulus!*” he called next, relishing each syllable. Another jet of light sprang from his cane, striking James and freezing him to the spot. James eyes bulged, both in surprise and horror. He strained to see past the advancing Filch. The water-woman was escaping, her dark hair still hanging wet against her back in ribbons. Lily’s head lolled pathetically in the woman’s strong arms. A moment later, both of them dashed out of sight.

James tried to call out to Lily once more, but his lips were as numb as stone.

Filch nodded at him slowly, smugly. “Weren’t expecting *that*, I’ll wager, were you? Nooo, it’s a new day, my pet. A new day indeed.”

“Hey Filch,” a voice asked from a nearby doorway. James couldn’t see the speaker, but he recognized the voice. Filch grunted and turned, wrestling his cane upright again. James heard Scorpius step forward, his feet slopping on the sodden stone. “Has anyone taught you this one yet?”

A blast of red light lit the corridor and Filch exclaimed with mingled rage and surprise. His cane clattered to the floor. A moment later, the man himself crumpled full length, unconscious.

“*Liberatio!*” Scorpius exclaimed, pointing his wand at James. The freezing spell fell away and James nearly collapsed under his own sudden weight.

“Come on!” Scorpius called urgently, already running along the corridor, his feet kicking up cold splashes. James launched forward to catch up.

“They went to the right!” he gasped, firming his grip on his wand. “What happened to you?”

“I was right behind you when Filch showed up,” Scorpius gasped. “I ducked out of sight behind an arch. Waited until I could Stun him. What was that thing that took Lily?”

Before James could answer, a scream echoed piercingly from ahead. It was not Lily, and yet the sound of it chilled James’ blood. The two boys ran harder, finally reaching the end of the corridor and flinging themselves around the corner. What they saw stopped both of them in their tracks.

Silhouetted against a single guttering torch, two figures wrestled violently. One of them was the water-woman, her hair flinging in wet ropes, her gown spattering droplets in every direction. The other, incredibly, was a writhing, hissing, monstrous snake, easily ten feet long but extremely lithe, its body gleaming yellowly in the torchlight. Lily lay in the foreground, still unconscious, face-down on the stone floor.

James darted forward, heedless of the screaming, hissing battle, and scooped his sister into his arms. He lunged back with her, meeting Scorpius, who helped Lily to her feet. She began to moan groggily. Running footsteps approached heavily from behind. James glanced back expecting to see Filch, but was instead surprised to see Zane, his eyes bulging, his breath coming in heavy gusts.

“What in the world is that!?” he wheezed, pointing at the struggle before them.

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James shook his head in bewilderment.

Ahead of them, the snake twined viciously, coiling around the struggling water-woman. Its jaw unhinged, hissing directly into its adversary's face, and the figure caught it by the throat, barely restraining it. They seemed to be caught in a trembling stalemate. Then, suddenly, the woman fell apart, cascading into loose water. She splashed into a broad puddle, stretched into a rivulet, and streamed away toward a large grate. The snake fell to the floor, writhing and splashing in the receding puddle.

"Chase that one!" Scorpius cried, pointing at the snake and lunging after the streaming water.

"Are you crazy!?" James replied.

"Go!" Zane gasped, pressing a hand to his side. "I'll stay with Lil. I'm all chased out after hearing you guys screaming like banshees and running around to find you! Go, go, go!"

James nodded, feeling dazed and off-kilter. He began to run after the retreating snake.

As he chased it into a new corridor, he heard the monstrous creature's slithering retreat. Great, swooping scrapes betrayed its location as it slipped down a shallow staircase. James ran toward it, asking himself at every step what he would do if he caught it.

He reached the staircase and was dismayed to see that it ended in an enclosed landing with only a single narrow door-- a mop closet most likely. The snake was nowhere in sight. James stopped, considering his options. His heart pounded like a kettle drum in his ears.

He began to inch down the stairs, straining his eyes in the darkness for any sign of the snake. It had to have gone into the closet. But how? Snakes couldn't turn door knobs. Could they?

James fumbled with his wand, clutched it in his fist, and pointed it low at the door. With a trembling hand, he reached out, touched the doorknob, and drew a deep, shaking breath. Finally, as hard as he could, he wrenched the door open. It banged sharply against the outer wall.

Huddled in the bottom of the closet, shaking and slicked with sweat, was Nastasia. She looked up at James with her eyes.

Slowly, dumbfounded, he lowered his wand.

"Don't tell anybody," she said, dropping her eyes again. "And I'll tell you everything."

Stunned speechless, James pocketed his wand. He reached down and took Nastasia's hand, helping her to her feet. She trembled violently, her purple hair matted into a wild strew. Slowly, they made their way back up the stairs.

"Well doesn't this just complete the picture," a voice growled lividly as they emerged into the corridor. "Look, Mrs. Norris. Two more mice for the trap."

James looked up, unsurprised, to see Filch standing before him, his clothes sopping wet from his encounter with the floor, his cane pointed firmly in their direction. Before him, Scorpius, Zane and Lily stood miserably. Mrs. Norris purred luxuriously as she circled their feet, hemming them in. Lily met James' eyes with abject terror, pleading with him silently.

"Well now," Filch said thoughtfully, cocking his head to one side, a hateful grimace cinching the corner of his mouth. "I wonder if it's too early... to wake the headmaster?"



As it turned out, rather unsettlingly, the Headmaster was already awake. Grudje sat placidly behind his desk, fully dressed, mildly surveying Filch and the students as they filed into the circular office. The hearth was dark and cold, leaving the room pearly grey as dawn seeped into the sky beyond the single window.

Filch nodded curtly, triumphantly, glancing from the headmaster to the line of students, as if no explanation was necessary. Indeed, Grudje asked no questions, merely looked calmly from face to face, seeming to catalogue each for future reference.

"They had *this* with them," Filch growled, stepping toward the headmaster's desk and dropping a mass of damp cloth onto its corner.

"I see," Grudje nodded slowly. "The famed Invisibility Cloak. Indeed, rather damning. Your vigilance is commendable, Mr. Filch."

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“I’d not have caught them at all if not for your special, er, *gift*, Headmaster,” Filch brandished his cane and smiled thinly at the students. “They *Stunned* me, I’ll have you know. Fortunately, in the end, they were no match for Mrs. Norris and I. In decades past, rapscallions such as these would have gone unapprehended *and* unpunished.”

“Mr. Grudje,” Zane spoke up, addressing the headmaster. “Filch doesn’t know the whole story. We can explain! There was this watery lady --”

“Quiet yourself, young man,” Grudje interrupted gently, rising from his chair. His stringy grey hair hung against his sallow cheeks as he turned, stepping toward the window. “This is not the Wizengamot. Your testimony is neither required nor desired. Mr. Caretaker, have you explained to the students your rather expanded powers?”

Filch glanced quickly back at the students. “Well. No sir. Not as such. I didn’t think... that is, I thought it might be better if... surprise being the preferred...”

“Relax, my friend,” Grudje said, raising a calm hand. “There is no wrong answer. No technicalities upon which your quarry will slip through your grasp. And yet, with the capture of these unfortunate miscreants, I believe the time for secrecy has passed. Students,” Grudje turned and looked back at Zane, Nastasia, Lily, Scorpius and James. “You are now aware that your dear caretaker, bereft these many years of the powers required to fully occupy his post, has now been equipped and deputized by myself to do everything necessary to maintain order and discipline within these walls.”

“But,” Lily said in a tiny voice. “Magic doesn’t work that way, does it? You can’t just give a wand to someone without magic and expect it to work.”

“Very astute, Ms. Potter,” Grudje replied encouragingly. “As such, you surely know that the spells employed by Mr. Filch are not his own. The magic of your caretaker’s cane is *my* magic. I would urge you not to test its limits. But onto business. Mr. Caretaker, if I am not mistaken, two of these individuals are not, in fact, Hogwarts students.”

“No, sir,” Filch grumbled reluctantly, eyeing Zane and Nastasia. “They’ve abused their privileges, sneaking onto Hogwarts property by means of those damned cabinets. You’ll recall that it was my recommendation that their doors be guarded at all times.”

“In any case,” the headmaster nodded indulgently, “these two are not our jurisdiction. Please see that they are escorted back to their proper school once we are through. I will speak directly to their chancellor and assure that their misdeeds are addressed in an appropriate manner.”

“Headmaster,” James said nervously, stepping forward. “We really need to explain what we saw tonight. We’ll accept whatever punishment you give us, but this is really important.”

Grudje met James’ eyes for a long moment, his gaze utterly inscrutable. Finally, he spread his hands and bowed his head slightly. “Go ahead, Mr. Potter,” he said with silky magnanimity. “You have the floor.”

James drew a deep breath, glancing quickly back at the others. Scorpius glared at him severely and shook his head. Lily’s eyes were still wide with terror. Nastasia looked away, her face as pale as a gravestone.

“We were out after hours,” James admitted, turning back to Grudje. “And we were using the Invisibility Cloak. Filch is right. He caught us, fair enough. But there was something else. All of us saw it...”

Clumsily but thoroughly, James described the watery woman; her appearance out of the mysterious puddle, her attempted abduction of Lily, and her furious battle with the snake. Lily nodded her corroboration, shuddering at the memory. Zane and Scorpius offered their own details, explaining how the battle had ended, the liquefaction of the water woman, her escape down the grate, and the fleeing of the giant snake.

Nastasia merely stared into the dark fireplace, as if wishing it were lit and she had a handful of Floo powder, desperate to transport herself somewhere else--*anywhere* else.

James did not tell what he knew about her and the snake.

Grudje listened, his grey face showing merely polite patience. When the tale was finished, he nodded to himself and drew a deep breath. “Mr. Caretaker,” he said, returning to his desk. “Please escort the Alma Aleron students to their cabinet. The other three will then accompany you to your office. I trust you to implement their discipline as you see fit.”

Filch’s face creased into a tight smile. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“But wait a minute,” Scorpius interjected, his brow lowering. “Aren’t you going to do anything about what we saw? Someone broke into the school and nearly got away with a student!”

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“Mr. Malfoy,” Grudje replied smoothly, seating himself creakily behind his desk. “I assure you, we are all quite safe. I would encourage you to be rather more concerned about your discipline.”

“We all saw her!” James insisted, approaching Grudje’s desk. “You can’t just ignore that!”

The headmaster turned toward Filch, “Tell me, Mr. Caretaker, did you see this mysterious figure?”

Filch’s smile cinched a notch tighter. “No, Headmaster. I certainly did not.”

Grudje nodded approvingly. “Very well. And did you, perchance, encounter any evidence of a break-in?”

“None apart from the unlocked Great Hall doors, sir,” Filch replied, raising his chin. “No doubt the work of these two invaders.”

“There you have it,” Grudje gestured toward Filch. “It seems that there was indeed a break-in. Fortunately, the perpetrators have been quite handily captured by our tireless caretaker. I see no more cause for concern.”

Lily stepped forward, joining her brother before the desk. “But she tried to take me! She was made of water! If it hadn’t been for that giant snake...!”

For the first time, Grudje’s face displayed emotion; James saw anger rise into the headmaster’s eyes, whitening his already pale cheeks. “Ms. Potter,” he said coolly, quietly, “I am disappointed to see that you have adopted your brother’s penchant for seeking attention via elaborate stories. Or perhaps you are merely a willing accomplice and this is all his idea? Frankly, I find either option distasteful in the extreme.”

James stared at the headmaster in shock. “But... we didn’t make any of it up!” he exclaimed. “We all saw it! Why would we invent something so horrible?”

“Why indeed?” Grudje concurred. “I suspect it is a family trait, passed on from father to son. And now, unfortunately, to daughter as well. This, you may as well know, is what the caretaker will be implementing punishment for. Not the mere sneaking out after hours. Under previous headmasters, your outlandish stories have been allowed to take root, to foment fear and panic, all so that you may assume some sense of importance. You wish for fame, Mr. Potter, like your father before you. He had his basilisk; you have your mysterious giant snake. He had his Lord Voldemort. You have your Lady of the Lake.” He arched his

eyebrows as James' face paled. "Yes, Mr. Potter, I know of the stories you have told in the wake of last summer's events. Profiting from the unfortunate accidental death of your own cousin. Others may tolerate your wild tales, calling them delusion or shock, but I know a plain liar when I meet one, Mr. Potter. You, I fear, are beyond hope. Your young sister, however... may not be so far gone."

Grudje turned to Filch again. "A change of plan, Mr. Caretaker," he announced. "Do not punish Mr. Potter after all. There is no point, as you can see. He is unteachable. Rather, add his punishment to his sister's, and see to it that he watches. Perhaps she may yet learn not to emulate his mistakes, and he may understand the consequences of involving her in them."

Lily's hand suddenly gripped James', squeezing so hard he could feel it tremble.

"You can't do that!" James exclaimed, at exactly the same moment that Zane proclaimed the same thing.

"I assure you that I can," Grudje said, a note of smugness creeping into his voice as he dismissed them.

Filch began to herd the students toward the door, a tight, merciless smile still etched on his face. James shook his head, refusing to go. He approached the headmaster's desk directly and leaned on it with both hands.

"I'll tell my dad," he said furiously.

Grudje looked up at him, his eyebrows rising inquisitively. "Will you?" he replied thoughtfully. "Yes, perhaps you should. The elder Potter would indeed be quite unhappy about these events. And yet you may be interested to know that, as a parent of students at this school, both your mother and father have legally granted me the freedom to maintain order as I see fit. This includes disciplinary actions. In short, I am not only acting on behalf of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, but on behalf of your parents. They may indeed decide they cannot support my methods, but that would place them in breach of our agreement, and that, I fear, would necessarily require your removal from this school. Perhaps you would prefer that?"

James' face burned red with anger and confusion. Was the headmaster telling the truth? Had his parents made an agreement with Hogwarts to support whatever disciplines the headmaster doled out?

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Could he, James, truly afford to be removed from Hogwarts while there were so many dodgy and dangerous things going on?

Grudje seemed to sense what James was thinking. He allowed a very small smile. "Come, Mr. Potter," he beckoned softly. "I can light the fire in my grate. We can contact your father immediately. Surely he is awake by now, preparing for his oh-so-important work as head Auror? Why, with any luck you may be comfortably returned to your home in Marble Arch this very evening. Shall we, Mr. Potter? Let us not keep the others waiting."

James was frozen with indecision. Next to him, Lily trembled. She leaned close to him and whispered, "Please, don't James. We can't leave Hogwarts! I... I can handle this."

James looked aside at her in surprise. He could see that she meant it. He sighed with deep reluctance.

"No," he answered finally.

"I'm sorry?" Grudje raised his voice. "Forgive me. My hearing is not quite what it used to be."

"I said no," James repeated miserably, standing away from the headmaster's desk.

Grudje nodded gravely. "I see. Well then. Mr. Caretaker, the day is begun. If you hurry, you may mete out your disciplines before classes begin. No point putting off the inevitable."

Scorpius shook his head. "But we've been up all night," he said hopelessly. "And it's breakfast. Aren't detentions usually scheduled for a later time?"

Grudje ducked his tongue lightly. "I fear you should have thought of that before making the unwise choice to engage in lies and debauchery. But fear not, Mr. Malfoy," the headmaster smiled benignly. "You are building character! Like young Ms. Potter, there may yet be hope for you as well. Choose your friends better, young man, and let us hope that our next meeting will be under happier circumstances."

Hopelessly, James turned to leave, reaching to collect the Invisibility Cloak from the corner of Grudje's desk. The headmaster moved with lithe suddenness, pinning the Cloak to the desk with his wand.

"I think I shall keep this for a while," Grudje chided softly. "After all, it does present a rather irresistible temptation to someone of your personality. Doesn't it, Mr. Potter?"

James could hear the smile in the headmaster's voice. He refused to look at him. After a long, wretched pause, he released the Cloak, leaving it on the corner of the desk.

"Come along, my pets," Filch urged cheerfully. "The headmaster is right. The day is already begun, and we have much to do. Oh yes," he nodded eagerly, his beady eyes sparkling. "Much to do *indeed*."

As Filch pushed them toward the door, James glanced aside at the collection of portraits of former headmasters. Merlin's hung closest to the door, still dead as wood, its eyes staring like coins. Next to this, Severus Snape watched coolly, his black eyes imperious and smug.

Next to him, however, the portrait of Albus Dumbledore hung blank, dark, and conspicuously empty.



Filch muttered to himself as he led James, Lily and Scorpius down, staircase after staircase, to his office in the labyrinthine depths of the dungeons. Mrs. Norris ran ahead, her bushy tail held high, meowing eagerly.

Nastasia and Zane were gone, sent back to Alma Aleron via the cupboards in the Great Hall. Filch had not paused even to allow the remaining three to nip a piece of toast from the platters lining the house tables. Few other students were up this early, but the ones who were watched with pale faces and wide eyes as Filch herded the three back toward the doors, smiling thinly, his cane rapping loudly on the stone floor.

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“Here we are, then,” he said with mock cordiality, shaking out an enormous key ring. It jingled like sleigh bells as he socked the long key into its hole and twisted. The door creaked open and Filch gave it an impatient shove, banging it against a line of antique wooden filing cabinets. He showed his teeth to James and raised an arm welcomingly. “After you, my pet.”

James took a deep, shaky breath and led Lily into the room, Scorpius following close behind. Filch’s office was quite small, almost unbearably stuffy, and obviously unaccustomed to visitors. In the centre of the room a tall desk stood, every inch of its surface buried under layers and layers of parchments, newspapers, cheap magazines, disused mugs and goblets, bottles, ratty quills, dry ink pots, and assorted, indecipherable odds and ends. More stacks leaned against the wall behind the desk, reaching nearly to the ceiling and looking precarious enough to fall over at the slightest breath. There was just enough of a pathway for Filch to round his desk and reach a rickety rolling chair, which he pushed aside. Its wheels screeched like angry rats.

“Well?” he demanded, eyeing the three severely. “Sit!” He gestured with one callused hand toward the row of filing cabinets which squatted behind the door. Shoved against them, half-buried in years of clutter, was a small classroom desk. Two child-sized chairs were crammed beneath it.

“Not you,” Filch growled as James approached the desk tentatively. “You’ll stand. Just there. And shut the door fast before you let all the heat out. Where are your manners?”

Reluctantly, James pushed the door shut until the lock clicked. Behind him, the tiny chairs scraped and rattled as Scorpius and Lily sat.

“I’ve got just the thing for you two,” Filch said on the tail of a sigh, as if he had been waiting years for this moment. With surprising delicacy, he reached down and unrolled a drawer from the middle of his desk. “A great man is Headmaster Grudje. A great man indeed. But he is not the first headmaster of this school to truly understand the importance of discipline. There was once a headmistress... a woman of surprising talents and admirable convictions...”

As Filch spoke, he withdrew a pair of quills from the drawer and examined them critically. Their feathers were black, matted and greasy looking. The quill tips were yellowed with age, stained an unsettling

maroon at their points. Without looking up from the quills, Filch rounded the desk, approaching the students.

“In the good old days,” he said quietly, almost to himself, “we had thumbscrews and racks. I thought I understood punishment. But that headmistress showed me the *subtle* art of discipline. Sometimes, it is the softest voice that speaks the loudest. Sometimes, the lightest lines cut the deepest...”

Filch sighed disconsolately, lost in memory. Finally, he looked down at the students again. “I had a picture of that headmistress for quite a long time, hung right next to my desk there. Had to take it down. *Some* people thought it a bit... *impolitic*. She was imprisoned by that time, after all, however unjustly. She died there, in Azkaban.”

Filch stared at the blank spot on the wall for a long moment. James had the unsettling suspicion that there were tears glimmering in the old man’s eyes. He made no effort to wipe them away.

Finally, he sniffed hugely, turned, and held up the quills. “But in some ways she lives on. These once were hers, left behind upon her rather abrupt departure. I claimed them, of course, knowing there would be a day when they would prove useful once again. Here you go, my young miss...” With a stiff bow and a moist-eyed smile, he handed one of the quills delicately to Lily. She took it with great trepidation, pinching its feather between her thumb and forefinger.

Filch nodded approvingly, and then proffered the second quill to Scorpius. James felt a deepening sensation of coldness in his stomach, despite the warmth of the room.

“Lines, my pets,” Filch announced, turning away. He collected his cane where it leant in the corner, then pointed it at back at Scorpius and Lily, who flinched. “*Exorier!*” he spat fervently. With a pop, large sheets of blank parchment appeared before the seated students.

Filch lowered his cane proudly and scratched his chin. “Let us see. How about ‘I... will... not... associate... with... troublemakers’. Yes,” he nodded, narrowing his eyes at James. “I think that will do nicely. One hundred repetitions, if you please. That means *two* hundred for you, my pet, since you are assuming your brother’s portion. Morning classes are barely an hour away. If you cannot finish the task before then, you will return this evening for one hundred more.”

Scorpius rolled his eyes irritably. “Fine,” he sighed. “Ink, please?”

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“Oh,” Filch smiled broadly. “Ink won’t be necessary.” Suddenly, a thought seemed to strike him. He leaned close to Lily. A moment later, she hissed in pain and withdrew her hand. She looked down at it in alarm. A tiny scratch had appeared on the smooth skin of the back of her hand, already welling blood.

“It won’t heal,” Filch said, still smiling encouragingly, “until you finish the entire line.”

“Look,” James spoke up, stepping forward to get between Filch and Lily. “I’m the one who did wrong. Not her. I should be the one doing lines. She’s just a first year!”

“*Step... back!*” Filch commanded, raising his voice to a hoarse roar. He placed his hand against James’ chest and shoved him firmly backwards. “You’ll stand there and watch or I will double her lines this moment. Understood?”

James felt a nearly undeniable urge to shove the old man’s hand away. He wanted to brandish his wand and curse Filch right in the face. His hands balled into hard fists at the very thought. Behind Filch, Lily watched, her face draining of colour, cradling her wounded hand.

Filch leaned closer to James, his brow lowering. “You had your chance to run back to your daddy, Potter,” he breathed. “Now, your only choice is to submit. Or perhaps you are thinking of a duel?” He raised his stubbly chin, a mean smile curling the corners of his mouth. “In the past, poor old Squib Filch would have been no match. But now... things have changed a bit, haven’t they?”

He rapped his cane menacingly on the floor. Without taking his eyes from James’ face, he stepped backwards, watching.

“*Write!*” he commanded.

Lily jumped. She leaned over her parchment, lowered the quill once again in her trembling, bleeding hand, and began to write once more. James listened, his fists still trembling at his sides, as her quill scratched over the parchment. Blood-red words began to glisten in her neat, slanting handwriting. Blood-red scratches dug magically into the pale skin of her hand.

When the line was finished, she jerked her hand back from the paper. Instantly, the bloody cuts began to fade from her skin, healing as James watched. She exhaled shakily, and then looked up at him.

“It’s all right,” she said quietly. “It’s just for a little while.”

“Silence,” Filch ordered, returning to his desk and lowering into his rickety chair. “You have fifty-four minutes. The clock is ticking.”

Scorpius looked from James to Lily, his mouth pressed into a pale line of rage. He began to write, quickly, as if pain was something he was used to enduring.

Lily saw this, seemed to draw bravery from it, and leaned over her parchment again. Two quills scratched loudly in the tiny office.

James watched, anger boiling in his chest, throbbing like a pulse in the corners of his eyes. He could scarcely believe this was happening. Filch had always seemed merely a vaguely comic nemesis, never a real threat. Only now did James realize that the old man’s viciousness had only been kept in check by his powerlessness, and the good judgment of his superiors.

Those days were apparently over.

At the moment, James cared no longer whether he got expelled from Hogwarts. His sister’s safety had been entrusted to him, and despite that he had allowed her to get into this mess. He would tell his parents everything, first thing, as soon as this ordeal was over.

And somehow, some way, Filch would pay.



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8. THWARTING GRUDJE

As the Saturday morning sun burned the dew into mist, James, Scorpius and Rose picked their way across the grounds toward Hagrid's hut. The half-giant was already outside, whistling cheerily and sawing a hunk of freshly lumbered wood into a rough beam.

"Thought we'd go all out and replace a few warped rafters while we're at it," he announced, clapping James on the back in greeting while the saw continued of its own accord, spewing sawdust into the wet grass. "I see yeh were as good as yer word, bringin' along some extra helpers. Morning Rosie, Mr. Malfoy."

As always, Hagrid's voice cooled a little when addressing Scorpius. Some things, James knew, were harder to forget than others, and it was common knowledge that Scorpius' now dead grandfather, Lucius, had once arranged for Hagrid to be sent to Azkaban for a time. Despite this, within fifteen minutes, Hagrid's good nature and cheerful

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mood took over and he was soon hoisting the blond boy to the roof and showing him the ins and outs of nailing shingles.

“Very nice, Mr. Malfoy,” he nodded encouragingly. “Yeh’ve got quite an eye fer detail. Couldn’t make those shakes any straighter with a ruler, I’d wager.”

Scorpius nodded half-heartedly, but James could tell that he was pleased with himself.

By mid-morning teatime the sun had risen to a hard diamond, warming the late autumn air and revealing a nearly completed new section of roof, its fresh shakes a pristine cedar pink against the faded grey of the rest. The smell of sawdust hung in the air of the hut, mingling with the crackle of the fire and the steam of black tea.

“Midnight flying,” Hagrid shook his massive head, smiling as he poured. “Sounds like somethin’ yer dad would’a done, I admit. Though he never would’a had the gall to crash through my hut roof.”

He plunked the tea onto the table with a chuckle.

Scorpius reached for a cup. “Potters certainly seem to have a knack for trouble,” he said pointedly, arching an eyebrow at James. “*And* dragging other people along for the ride.”

Rose stared seriously into her cup, swishing the tea from side to side. “Hagrid,” she said suddenly, “What do you think about Mr. Filch being granted magical powers?”

Hagrid looked up, surprised. “Magical powers?” he repeated, smiling in confusion. “Yeh can’t mean Mr. Filch. Why, he’s a... well... Yeh see, he’s a...” he paused, his brow working furiously, trying to fight the inertia of his mouth. “He’s... the caretaker, Mr. Filch is. What’s he, er, need magic for?”

“Everyone knows he’s a Squib, Hagrid,” Scorpius rolled his eyes. “But the headmaster has given him a magical cane. It runs on Grudje’s own magic, somehow. And Filch is going a bit mad with it.”

“Weerrl,” Hagrid said, easing himself into a chair, a cup and saucer balanced in his enormous hand. “I don’t s’pose there’s any harm in that. I dabbled in a little illegal magic back when I wasn’t supposed to. Had me wand made into an umbrella jus’ ter keep it secret. Old Headmaster Dumbledore knew about it, o’ course. Couldn’t ever get anythin’ past him. I still use it these days, even though I don’t need ter hide it anymore.” He nodded toward his pink umbrella where it leant next to the door.

“We know,” Rose said, smiling slightly. The pink umbrella was fairly hard to miss. “But still. Even when Dumbledore was allowing you to use your magic umbrella, he never gave Filch any magic powers, did he? I never even thought such a thing was possible. You think Grudje is just a better wizard?”

Hagrid looked so sharply at Rose that his tea slopped into its saucer. “Albus Dumbledore was likely the best wizard ever there was. I’ll have yeh know that he could’a given magic powers to a walnut if he’d had a mind. There’s nothin’ any wizard alive could do that Albus Dumbledore couldn’a done better. Blimey, he’s like to have invented half the spells in yer textbooks!”

“Of course,” Rose demurred quickly. “You’re right. So why do you suppose he never shared his powers with Mr. Filch, though? And Headmaster Grudje did?”

Hagrid settled back into his chair with a long creak. “Headmasters is different, that’s all. That doesn’t mean Mr. Grudje is wrong. It jus’ means he does things ‘is own way. Yeh lot don’t need to concern yerselves about it, b’lieve me. Don’ go makin’ the same mistakes your parents did. And not jus’ once, neither! They was always doubtin’ the powers that be. Comin’ to me with wild stories ‘bout how Professor Snape was out ter get ‘em and how Headmaster Dumbledore was foolish ter trust ‘im. If they’d knew half the things I knew...”

“You mean the half you didn’t accidentally tell them?” James murmured with a grin.

“Exaggerations,” Hagrid proclaimed with a wave of his hand. “Yeh’ve been readin’ too many of Professor Revalvier’s stories. Why, if she was here and not on holiday even she’d admit most o’ that was made up just ter keep the tale int’restin’.” He pushed further back into his chair and sighed wistfully. “But it’s true that things were very different back in those days, and that’s mostly ‘cause of Headmaster Dumbledore. He was a great man, and don’t let anyone ever tell yeh any different.”

James suddenly found himself thinking uncomfortably of Professor Avior. It occurred to him that his father, Harry, wasn’t the only person who would be rather unstrung by the existence of a dodgy Doppelganger of Albus Dumbledore.

“Tell us about him, Hagrid,” he said. “Did Headmaster Dumbledore have any, er, secrets? You’d know as well as anyone, wouldn’t you?”

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James half expected Hagrid to chafe at the question, but the huge man merely gave a shrug and stared out the window. “Everyone has secrets, I expect,” he said. “And the greatest of us prolly have the greatest secrets of all. I never pried, o’course, but I can tell yeh this: all those stories that have been told about Dumbledore since his death-- ‘specially the tripe written by that ‘orrible Rita Skeeter-- it’s all just plain rubbish. He may ‘ave had his secrets, and he might’ve done some things he regretted in his youth. But all that was nothin’ compared ter the good he did overall. Why, when he was still a young man Dumbledore duelled and defeated the infamous Gellert Grindelwald, who had once been ‘is best mate back before Grindelwald turned all dark and vicious. That takes more’n power, mind. That takes strength of character, fighting someone who was once like a brother t’ yeh!”

Hagrid grew silent and stared hard at the window. The fire crackled merrily. Trife snuffled and stretched by Hagrid’s feet. Outside, voices called in the distance, enjoying the unusually warm Saturday morning.

“A great man,” Hagrid said again, shaking his head as if snapping out of a trance. He sipped his tea. “Yeh know, there were those what didn’t believe the news when he died. Said it wasn’t possible, ‘specially the way it ‘appened. Silly, o’ course, but that’s the kind o’ legend Albus Dumbledore was.

“Even at ‘is funeral, there were those who refused ter believe it was all over, refused ter admit ter themselves that there was any body in that crypt. It had ter be a trick, or a mistake, or some sort of elaborate plan. Even today...” He paused and studied the dregs of his teacup. In a lower voice he went on, “Even today, there are people who think Albus Dumbledore is still out there, waiting’, watchin’, just bidin’ his time, working out some last, master plan. And when the time is jus’ right, when the perfect moment arrives... why, he’ll show himself again.” He nodded to himself and sighed hugely. “He’ll show himself again and make everything jus’ the way it’s supposed ter be.”

He shook himself once more and looked around at the students seated at his table. “But that’s silliness, o’ course. Even great men die. I expect we all know that by now. They die, and when they do... why, there’s no comin’ back.”

James nodded slowly, emphatically. He did know that. He knew it all too well.



At breakfast the following Thursday, just as the first frost laced the windows and the fire in the Great Hall was stoked to capacity against the creeping chill, Nobby returned. He landed clumsily on the table, nearly stumbling into James' porridge, looking unusually bedraggled and exhausted.

"That must have been some journey," Rose commented in surprise, putting down her pumpkin juice.

James reached for Nobby's leg and began to untie the parcel of notes attached there. "It's about time, too. I've got a nice fat letter all ready to go back. Just wait until Mum and Dad hear what's been going on here."

He untied the notes from Nobby's leg and then paused, frowning down at them in his hands.

"What?" Ralph asked in a hushed voice. "Should we wait to read them later, do you think?"

"No point," Scorpius muttered, leaning close to James and peering at the letters. "Look."

He took the letters from James and held them up. Lily, Rose and Ralph leaned close.

"Those are *our* letters!" Rose hissed in surprise. She looked around at the others, alarm dawning on her face. "The ones we sent to my parents and Uncle Harry! They came back unopened! What's going on here?"

James turned to peer up at the head table. Headmaster Grudje was seated in the centre, neither eating nor drinking, as usual. It was difficult for James to tell from so far away (especially without his dreaded glasses) but the headmaster seemed almost to be watching him. After a moment, the old grey wizard stood and tapped his empty goblet with his

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wand, calling attention. The babble of voices died away as everyone turned toward the head table.

“Some of you will have noticed,” Grudje announced calmly, his deep voice ringing through the hall, “that there have been some changes regarding school post. Due to the current stresses placed upon the Vow of Secrecy, external measures have been implemented to ensure the continued security of the magical world. For the time being, no unauthorized post will be allowed in nor out without the consent and approval of school officials.”

A wave of whispers rippled over the room at this rather incredible turn of events. Rose met James’ eyes with growing unease.

“Calm yourselves, students,” Grudje went on, raising his voice. “There is no cause for concern. If you have need to contact your families, you may do so at any time. You will merely be required to do so via myself or, if you prefer, Professor Votary. If we approve your correspondence, it will be sent without delay via a fleet of especially charmed owls currently in our employ. Alas, your own owls, and those in the stable of the school owlery, would simply circle the school endlessly, unable to break the temporary boundaries.”

James reached to stroke Nobby’s bedraggled back. “Sorry, mate,” he whispered. “I didn’t know what I was sending you into.”

“They can’t do this,” Rose whispered stridently. “It’s... it’s not legal!”

Scorpius frowned up at the head table. “This is no new rule,” he muttered. “I’d wager that boundary has been up for weeks. He’s just telling us now because people are starting to ask questions.”

“But why?” Ralph shook his head. “Are they really worried that the whole magical world will get blown open by a stray owl?”

James shook his head. “Guys like Grudje don’t care about the security of the magical world. They care about power. He’s shutting down the post because he can.”

“Or perhaps,” Lily said in a very low voice, “he’s just trying to keep his secrets?”

Scorpius looked at Lily sharply. “Are you suggesting that Grudje has stopped the post just to keep us from blabbing to our parents?”

James shuddered. The thought was almost too chilling to consider. Next to him, Lily shrugged slowly.

Later that afternoon, Rose and James caught up to Professor Votary outside his office.

“Yes, students,” he said, clutching his enormous, badge-covered carpet bag to his chest and locking the office door with a tap of his wand.

“We just wanted to ask about the post, sir,” Rose said, falling in step next to the short, fat wizard. “We have some letters that got returned to us. We were hoping, perhaps, you could just...”

“Just stamp them,” James added quickly. “Or whatever you need to do to just, you know, send them on.”

“A necessary measure, I suppose,” Votary sighed brusquely. “Personally, I suspect a few stray owls, leaked strategically into the Muggle world, would be an excellent way to break the news to them gently. Strategy and moderation is what’s called for! Nothing like the fiasco that occurred across the pond. Still, the march toward progress is always uphill, and equality is an egg best broken, er, slowly.” He seemed to consider this analogy critically for a moment as he walked, then shook his head. “Be that as it may, the headmaster is quite right, quite right indeed. Can’t allow things to slip any further out of hand. This must be handled delicately. So! Where are your letters?”

Rose glanced quickly up at the professor, and then at James. “We, er, don’t have them with us. We were just asking... what would it take?”

“You implied you were in rather a rush,” Votary frowned as they turned a corner. “Bring them to me and I will inspect them and send them straight on. It isn’t as if there is a queue a mile long at the moment.”

“They’re up in our dorms,” James answered lamely. “But, er, you’ll need to inspect them?”

Votary nodded briskly. “Why of course! That’s the entire point. Purely a formality, I assure you,” he explained. “I abhor any infringement of privacy, of course, but desperate times call for desperate measures and all that. The headmaster wants to assure that no overly incriminating objects or comments fall into the wrong hands. Sensible, if a bit, well, *totalitarian*. Peace at any cost, eh?” He hefted his carpet bag and tilted his head toward a prominent badge affixed to one end: *PEACE AT ANY COST!* it flashed in red letters.

James nodded unenthusiastically.

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Rose spoke up. “We’ll just bring them by your class tomorrow. Won’t we, James?”

“Sure we will,” James muttered.

Votary frowned at them vaguely. “Well. That will be fine, I suppose. Good evening, then, Ms. Weasley, Mr. Potter.”

They waited for the professor to walk on without them until he rounded a corner. Then, without a word, they ran down the stairs and out the doors of the entrance hall.

The sky was low and steely, packed with clouds and seemingly pregnant with icy rain. Wind marched across the lake, wrinkling its surface into long, iron-coloured breakers. The waves thudded against the dock, spraying mist over Scorpius, Lily and Ralph where they waited, their shoulders hunched under heavy cloaks.

“Any word from Zane and Nastasia?” James asked as he and Rose hurried to join them.

“I contacted Zane with the Shard,” Ralph said. “They’re coming to get us here in the next few minutes. Experimental Communications Club is meeting early today in some super-secret location so they got special permission to escort us over.”

James tilted his head quizzically. “They couldn’t just meet us outside the cabinet once we get to Alma Aleron?”

Ralph shrugged and tossed a hunk of stale bread onto the waves. A long pinkish tentacle surfaced, dabbed the bread, and then coiled around it, dragging it down. “Zane was all weird about it when I talked to him, like he was afraid to say too much or something. Chancellor Franklyn was going to forbid both of them from leaving campus ever again, but Zane’s head of house convinced him to go easy.”

“Good old Professor Cloverhoof,” James sighed. “Sometimes I guess it really is good to be a Zombie.”

“Sometimes nothing,” a voice declared from behind. James glanced back to see Zane clumping toward them along the dock, Nastasia close behind. “Sneaking around is almost the Zombie cardinal virtue,” the blonde boy went on. “Still, the Jersey Devil had to pull every trick in the old Zombie handbook to get us out of that one.”

“I was just a poor innocent bystander,” Nastasia added, batting her eyes meekly. “We Pixies don’t like to play that card much, but it works in a pinch. I got a stern talking to from Mother Newt and a week of cleaning cauldrons, but meh.” She shrugged and looked out over the

choppy waves. James tried to catch her eye. Ever since she had promised to tell him her snaky secret they had not had a moment alone. He hoped to corner her after today's discussion.

"So, what's going on with Ex-Comm?" Ralph asked Zane curiously. "Why'd you have to meet us here?"

Zane glanced around furtively. "Top secret stuff. Need-to-know basis. I'd tell you but I'd have to kill you."

"All right, all right," James said, rolling his eyes.

"They're reading our post," Rose stated, getting directly to the point.

"They're *reading* it?" Zane repeated. "They can't do that, can they?"

James' brow darkened. "Desperate times call for desperate measures," he said, quoting Professor Votary. "Peace at any cost! Bah! Votary's going along with it because he's a dupe, but Grudje is definitely clamping down on communication for his own reasons. Perhaps Lily is right and he's trying to keep us from reaching our parents."

Zane tilted his head consideringly. "I could take your letters back to the Aleron and mail them from there, I suppose."

"Already thought of that," Scorpius shook his head. "Owls don't cross oceans, remember?"

"*We* use pigeons," Nastasia corrected haughtily. "They totally cross oceans."

James plopped onto the end of the dock between Lily and Ralph as the others crammed around. "It's a good idea, but it would take too long. We need a way to contact my parents-- *and* Uncle Ron and Hermione," he added, nodding toward Rose, "straight away. The longer we wait, the creepier things get."

"Filch is totally abusing his magic!" Lily interjected, turning to Zane. "He's a Squib bully with a big old wand now, thanks to Grudje! He's got everyone scared to death now that he can catch and punish them however he wants!" She rubbed her own hand unconsciously where an angry red welt still formed a scribble on her skin.

"Filch supercharged is definitely seriously bad news," Zane whistled in awe. "Who else has he dropped the hammer on?"

Ralph shifted. "Who knows? It's a new rule that no one discusses their punishment," he said, his voice hardening. "It's supposed to be a privacy thing, but all it does is make everyone's imagination run

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wild. And there's Filch, always roaming the halls, just looking for reasons to give out his dreaded detentions, banging around that cane of his so we never forget what he can do."

"The whole school is feeling it," James agreed.

There was a pause as wind tore over the dock, slapping the waves against its pilings. When it fell away, Lily spoke up, changing the subject. "I've been wondering about something."

"What's that?" Rose asked, looking aside.

"When that horrible watery woman showed up..." Lily said thoughtfully, still staring at the waves. "Right before she grabbed me, she swiped at Peeves. Remember?"

Scorpius nodded. "Serves the little imp right."

Lily looked around, addressing everyone at once. "Has anyone seen Peeves since?"

James frowned, thinking hard. He glanced at Ralph, then the rest. "No, I can't say that I have, actually. Any of you?"

Scorpius and Ralph shook their heads.

"I haven't either," Rose admitted. "You think it's actually possible? Could that watery woman have really..."

"You can't kill a poltergeist," Nastasia said matter-of-factly. "They aren't technically alive to begin with."

Lily looked earnestly around at the others again. "Either way, Peeves seems to be gone. If he really was, somehow, wiped out by that thing..."

"It's proof that something really happened." James nodded. "It isn't just our word anymore."

"But," Zane shook his head firmly, "who-- or what-- was that woman? Where did she come from? How did she get into Hogwarts?"

James looked incredulously at Zane. "It was the Lady of the Lake," he declared. "She travels through water. I've seen it myself! She can go through pipes, lakes, even oceans. As long as there are faucets, she can get in."

Rose was frowning hard at James as he spoke. Finally, she said, "Are you totally sure about that, James?"

"As sure as I can be," James admitted. "I never really saw her face. But it makes sense. Don't you think?"

Rose shrugged nervously. "Perhaps. I suppose."

Ralph peered at her. "Do you have another idea, Rose?"

She shrugged again, not meeting his gaze.

Scorpius rolled his eyes. "Oh, let's not beat about the bush. We're all thinking the same thing."

"What?" James demanded, his face reddening.

"Think about it for a moment, Potter," Scorpius prodded. "The water-woman called Lily by name. She said she had missed her. And then she tried to run off with her. Doesn't it remind you of something?"

James shook his head stubbornly. "No! I don't have the faintest idea what you're getting at--"

"Petra," Lily answered softly, realization dawning on her.

James looked down at his sister, speechless. Her eyes were wide and thoughtful, almost eerily calm. Finally she looked up at him. "Petra took me once before. Remember? She magicked me right out of the audience of the play during your second year. She was going to sacrifice me in the Chamber of Secrets, all to get her mother and father back."

"Lily, that wasn't really Petra," James insisted nervously. "She was under the influence of the last shred of Voldemort in her soul. But she fought back! She overcame it and saved you in the end."

"Maybe she regrets that now," Lily replied. "Maybe she wants another chance."

"That *wasn't* Petra," James declared, raising his voice. Suddenly, as if to counter his argument, a memory flooded into his mind: the eerie woman's voice that had called out to him from the darkness of First Night. His father, watching from the Marauder's Map, had witnessed the confrontation. *It was Petra, son*, he had said, *Petra Morganstern...*

"Petra's the Bloodline," Ralph admitted quietly. "She may have overcome Voldemort's voice in her head once, but it won't just go away. It's with her forever. Eventually, probably..." He shrugged, unwilling to go on.

"And she's powerful," Zane added gravely. "She and Izzy both. Together they were somehow even more powerful than Merlin. He couldn't stop them."

James felt like he was falling, dropping into the depths of the lake beneath him. Coldness seeped into him from all around. "Sister fates," he said to himself, thinking back to that horrible night. "That's what she called them. The Lady of the Lake, Judith... she called Petra and Izzy... her Sister Fates."

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“You mean,” Rose asked tentatively, “maybe they’re all one and the same?”

“That doesn’t make any sense at all,” Ralph said, shaking his head.

But James wasn’t so sure. Suddenly, he felt less sure than he ever had in his life.

“None of this changes anything,” Zane said firmly. “Our first task is still to contact your parents somehow, get their help sorting all of this out.”

“Don’t you have another cousin here?” Nastasia piped up. “Maybe you could use him as a mule somehow, piggyback a secret message when he writes home. He wouldn’t arouse any suspicion, right?”

“Louis certainly is a mule,” Rose muttered. “And he’s about as suspicious as a Flobberworm. But there’s still the chance the secret note would be spotted when they inspect his letter. We need something we can be sure will get through.”

James suddenly sat up as an idea struck him. “Something we can be sure will get through,” he repeated, squinting thoughtfully. “Something that can’t be intercepted...”

“You having a brainstorm over there, James?” Zane asked.

“I might be,” James nodded. “But it’ll be risky. Especially with Filch on the loose. And we’ll need help.”

Scorpius cocked his head sceptically. “Help from who?”

James glanced back at him, his thoughts racing. “The whole Night Quidditch league.”

“Oh,” Scorpius shrugged sarcastically. “Just that. I’ll get right on it. You do know that Longbottom’s shut us down entirely, right?”

“Rose, Ralph and I will talk to Professor Longbottom,” James replied. “He can’t be on board with Grudje and his new rules.”

Rose narrowed her eyes. “Are you going to tell us this idea of yours?”

James shook his head. “Let me work out the details. Scorpius, just see if you can get all the teams out to the pitch tonight at midnight. Tell them it’ll undermine Filch and Grudje. That should get them there. I’ll explain everything then. Rose and Ralph, we need to corner Professor Longbottom tonight after dinner.”

“What about me?” Lily asked shrilly, perking up next to him. “I want in on this!”

“Not this time, Little Sister,” James said firmly. “And don’t argue with me. If Filch punishes you one more time for something I do, I swear I’ll curse him back to the stone age.”

“And me alongside you,” Ralph agreed fervently.

“I don’t know what you’ve got in mind,” Zane said, giving James the first real smile he had seen in weeks, “But I love it already. I wouldn’t miss it for all the mustard in New Amsterdam. For now, though, we’d better head back to the Aleron. Ex-Comm starts early today.”

With the meeting nominally adjourned, the group began to make its way back to the castle. As they walked, a fine, cold rain began to spritz in the wind, stinging their faces like sand. James dropped to the rear of the group, falling in alongside Nastasia.

“You and me,” he said under his breath, staring at the ground as he walked. “Tonight, after everything’s over. You promised you’d tell me everything.”

“I remember,” she murmured tersely.

“I’ve kept my part of the bargain,” he went on. “I haven’t told anyone. You keep yours.”

She glanced aside at him sharply, her eyes dark, nearly sparking with anger. Then, with eerie suddenness, her face changed. She leaned close to him in the stiffening rain, pressing her shoulder against his. She sighed deeply, shuddering as she let it out. Almost without thinking, James put an arm around her. She leant into it, letting him support her.

Zane, walking ahead of them, his shoulders hunched in the rain, fortunately did not notice.



“He’s completely mad,” James shook his head as he, Ralph and Rose climbed the stairs toward Professor Longbottom’s quarters some hours later. “Experimental Communications wasn’t meeting early at all.

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Zane just wanted to show us how he could gimmick the cabinets into taking us into the basements beneath Administration Hall.”

“*Did* he?” Rose exclaimed in a hushed voice, obviously impressed. “How is that even possible? That’s got to take some serious Technomancy!”

“Hah!” James scoffed. “You don’t understand how Zombies think. Why use messy quantum stuff like Technomancy when you can just play a cheap trick?”

Ralph explained, “Zane just planted a Protean charm on the Alma Aleron cabinet, connecting it to a silver coin he carries in his pocket.”

“So when he vanishes the coin to a new location,” James added, smiling despite himself, “the Protean charm sends the Alma Aleron cabinet to the same place.”

Rose squinted in concentration. “But that’s... that’s...” she shook her head in wonder. “That’s bloody brilliant. Seriously. So if he sends the silver coin to the basements beneath Admin Hall, their cabinet goes there, too. We step into this side and pop out beneath the guarded areas at ground level. But doesn’t anyone notice when their cabinet goes missing?”

“Nastasia came up with the fix for that one,” Ralph replied. “They hid an old crate behind the cabinet and put a *Visum Ineptio* charm on it. When the cabinet disappears, everyone sees the crate as the missing cabinet, but with a sign nailed to the door.”

James held up his hands as if framing a placard. “Caution: rabid nargle inside.”

Rose clucked her tongue. “They could have done better than that. Nargles don’t get rabies. Still, that’s dead brilliant. You didn’t explore the basements yet, did you?”

“No,” James said firmly. “No time. Besides, none of us were prepared.”

“And *double* besides,” Ralph interjected, “Those weren’t like any basements I’ve ever seen. More like catacombs twenty feet high!”

“And *triple* besides,” Rose said, stopping them outside Professor Longbottom’s door. “When you do head down to find this Crone Laosa witch and learn what we can about the Morrigan Web, I am totally coming along.”

Ralph boggled at her. “You have a bit of an unhealthy thing for danger, don’t you, Rose?”

“I’ve never seen dwarf subterranean architecture before,” she sniffed. “I’m a curious sort, that’s all.”

James stepped past her and rapped loudly on the door.

“No one is going anywhere,” he whispered, “until we get word to our parents about what’s going on here at Hogwarts. Let’s hope we can get Professor Longbottom on board with us.”

There was a shuffle from beyond the door, then the rattle of a lock. A moment later the door swung open, revealing the professor in his evening clothes: a pair of loose flannel slacks and vest over a white shirt, buttoned to the collar. He smiled down at the students, but James thought there was something else on the Professor’s face. Was it worry? Nervousness?

“James,” he said jovially, “Ralph, Rose. What can I do for you three?”

“Good evening, Professor,” James greeted him. “We were hoping to talk to you. Er, in private. It’s about... well, *you* know.”

The professor laughed lightly, and again there was an uncharacteristic brittleness in it. “I’m afraid I *don’t* know, in fact. But, er, certainly. Yes, do come in. I was just... well.” He glanced back into his rooms as if expecting something to jump out at him. After a moment, he stepped stiffly aside and gestured for them to enter.

The Professor’s sitting room was comfortably furnished and rather pleasantly cluttered. A huge painting of a sunlit greenhouse tended by a skinny monk dominated the wall over the fireplace. The monk dug enthusiastically in a bathtub-sized pot, occasionally swatting away the leafy tentacles of its inhabitant.

“Tea, perhaps?” Longbottom suggested, indicating a platter steaming happily with teapot and cups. “I was just about to have myself a nice after dinner spot. Happy to brew some more.”

“No thanks, Professor,” Rose said, seating herself on the sagging sofa. “We can’t stay long. We just wanted to talk about everything that’s going on, and ask for your help with something.”

James opened his mouth to explain further, but the professor overrode him. “I can assure you, Miss Weasley,” he said rather unnecessarily loudly. “As I have told you before, your O.W.L. studies are well in hand. You have years to memorize the notes I have provided in

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class. Just remember, Herbology is a lifetime study. I won't expect you to know everything after only a few short terms."

"That's," James said slowly, "not really what we came here to discuss, Professor. Scorpius told us everything, but don't worry, your secret is safe with us. Besides, Rose here says the Somnambulis isn't really illegal as much as it's just highly regulated."

"No fear there," Longbottom smiled, pouring hot water into his cup. "I've abandoned that particular pursuit. It was a hobby, but it ran its course. Interesting stuff, Somnambulis. It won't be on the test, however." He laughed lightly, unconvincingly.

"Yes," James nodded, frowning. Well, what we really want to talk to you about is Night--"

A loud clatter interrupted James, drowning his words as the tea platter crashed to the floor, shattering its freight of cups.

"Oh dear me," Longbottom said loudly, looking down at the broken cups, the teapot still steaming in his hand. "How clumsy of me." He glanced up at James, met his eyes, and then, slowly, shook his head, his eyes intense and full of warning.

"Here," Ralph said, getting out his chair and producing his oversized wand. "Let me help you with that, Professor."

With a few quick *reparo* charms, the tea set was reassembled and settled back onto the table. By the time the task was finished, everyone was standing, wands in hand, looking around rather uncomfortably.

"Well then," Longbottom nodded heartily. "Thank you very much for your assistance. How very clumsy of me indeed. I do hope I have addressed all of your, er, concerns. Do feel free to come by my quarters anytime. Anytime at all. Yes."

James, Ralph and Rose found themselves pressed toward the door. A moment later, they stood in the corridor outside, looking back at the professor in confusion.

"Thank you again for stopping by," Longbottom said, the smile fading from his face. "I will speak to you again tomorrow, I expect. At Herbology class. Perhaps you would be kind enough to stay afterward and help me re-pot some mandrakes. I know we aren't supposed to do it until later this term, but Professor Heretofore has asked me to expedite a few. They can be quite *loud*, you know. Quite *noisy* indeed."

He nodded meaningfully, the smile entirely gone from his face. Then, rather abruptly, he closed the door. It locked sharply.

“What,” Rose said in a low voice, “was *that* all about?”

Ralph scratched his head, staring at the closed door. “None of us have Herbology tomorrow. Do we?”

“Come on,” James sighed. “This whole place has gone nutters. Looks like we’re on our own tonight after all.”

Disgruntled and worried, the three made their way back toward the main stairs.



By midnight, the sky had finally cleared, revealing a bright sickle moon and a dusting of fine silvery stars. Early winter chill frosted the grass so that it crunched softly beneath James’ feet as he trotted across the pitch, meeting the crowd already milling on the centre-line.

“What’s the trunk doing here?” he asked in a harsh whisper, gesturing at the Quidditch trunk where it bucked in the moonlight.

“You asked for the entire Night Quidditch league,” Scorpius answered tersely. “What are we going to do, play Winkles and Augers? The trunk goes wherever the league goes.”

James ran a hand over his face. “We’re not here to play Quidditch,” he exclaimed. “We’re here to send a message to my dad!”

A babble of hushed voices arose on the night air. James held up his hands, calling for attention. “Look, you’re all as unhappy about the way things are going as I am, right? Filch running around like a one-man Inquisition and Grudje shutting down all post in and out of the school!”

“He isn’t shutting it down,” Nolan Beetlebrick commented. “He’s just keeping a tight rein on it.”

“Yeah,” Herman Potsdam shot back, “by bloody reading it all!”

Another rush of babbling voices arose in response to this.

“Quiet down, all of you,” Zane called hoarsely, stepping alongside James. “Seriously, this is dictator stuff. Grudje would probably

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call this whole meeting a subversive plot and throw us all in the dungeon if he caught us.”

Fiera Hutchins stabbed her hand into the air. “I don’t know about the rest of you,” she said, “but I thought this league was about Quidditch. I’m not looking to get rounded up by Filch. He’s gone completely mad.”

“Come on, James,” Albus called, cupping his hands to his mouth. “What’s the deal? The rest of the teachers won’t let Filch get away with this forever. Grudje may be the headmaster, but McGonagall and Longbottom have faced worse. They can handle this better than we can.”

At this, a tall figure stepped between James and Zane, making the gathered Night Quidditch players shrink back in alarm. James glanced up and was shocked to see Professor Longbottom, his face shadowed beneath a heavy cowl.

“You all should be back in your beds,” he said firmly. “Night Quidditch has been disbanded. You have no idea what you’ve risked coming out here again.”

“This is what we wanted to talk to you about earlier, Professor,” James hissed. “I didn’t want to do this behind your back. We wanted your help!”

Longbottom glanced down at him, his face grave beneath his cowl. “James, you more than anyone should understand the gravity of this sort of thing. If Filch discovers this...”

“I need to contact my dad,” James interrupted. “I need to tell him what’s happening here. And there’s more! I can’t tell it all to you now, but when we were in New Amsterdam, we ran into this--”

Longbottom hushed him suddenly. He glanced aside at the others gathered on the pitch. Most of them were dissolving into knots of nervous conversation. Only Albus watched from a distance, his eyes narrowed.

“Boys,” Longbottom whispered, leading James and Zane a few paces away from the others. “Things are much more serious than you know. Many teachers are even more worried than you.”

“Why, Professor?” James asked quietly. “Why doesn’t anyone stop Grudje and Filch?”

“Because Filch has the backing of Grudje, and Grudje has the backing of the Ministry,” Longbottom explained quickly. “Anyone who

defies them doesn't last long. You'll notice that Professor Revalvier is no longer teaching at Hogwarts."

"I thought she was just on holiday?" James frowned. "That's why that new substitute Wizlit teacher is filling in."

"Revalvier is not on holiday. She is under questioning by the Wizengamot for subversive behaviour. She was the first to challenge Grudje on his new policies, and she did so loudly. Within a week she was relieved of her post and taken to London for questioning."

"But," Zane sputtered, "for what?"

"Does it matter?" Longbottom answered helplessly. "She got herself into trouble with the Ministry once before for those books she published in the Muggle world. It wouldn't be difficult for Grudje to drum up new suspicions about her. And with her out of the way, he was free to fill her post with someone especially loyal to both him and the Ministry. Herbettina Blovius is no literature professor. She's an undersecretary to the Minister of Magic himself, albeit one with an unfortunate affection for... well, *certain kinds* of magical literature."

James nodded dourly. "I looked over the new class reading list. She's got us starting on Persephone Remora's stupid vampire series next term."

Longbottom shook his head dismissively. "The point is that Grudje gets rid of the people who challenge him. And he has *ways* of knowing who is against him. Few places seem to be safe from his ears. Not even my quarters. *That's* why I asked you to meet me in the greenhouses tomorrow," he added, exasperated. "The mandrakes would drown out our voices if anyone or anything was listening. I was going to tell you all of this then, when it was safer."

"I don't understand," Zane whispered. "Why don't you just contact James' Dad yourself? Obviously he wouldn't approve of what was happening here. Maybe he can get the Aurors involved or something, raise a stink about it until someone at the top listens."

Longbottom shook his head slowly. "As I said, Mr. Walker, things are much more serious than you know. Even teacher correspondence is subject to Grudje's inspection. He claims it is the edict of the Ministry, but we know better. Every teacher's floo is monitored. Travel is restricted. Any hint of 'subversion' is dealt with swiftly and permanently. There is plenty of secret resistance, of course. Myself, Professors McGonagall, Debellows, Trelawney, Flitwick, a few others.

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But we must keep very quiet and use the utmost care. If we are discovered, we will be removed from the school completely and therefore be of help to no one.”

“You seriously believe your own quarters are being spied on?” James rasped. “Is that why you were acting so daft tonight?”

“It is a very real possibility,” Longbottom sighed. “There is no question that Grudje has ears in the most unexpected places, although none of us yet knows how. I couldn’t let you talk about Night Quidditch in my quarters lest you incriminate all of us. James, you and all of these students must go back to your dormitories immediately. This is far too dangerous for any game.”

“We’re not here to play Quidditch, Professor,” Zane said. “James has an idea.”

James nodded fervently. “I think we can contact my dad,” he explained quickly. “If we all work together, that is. We can send him a short message; get him to talk to us later by floo. Are the dormitory hearths monitored?”

Longbottom shook his head slowly. “No... no I don’t think so. But how, James? How in the world can you get a message to your father?”

“We write it,” James answered. “In the sky, with all of *us* forming the letters. My dad has the Marauder’s Map-- it shows the whole castle and the locations of everyone in it-- and he says he’s keeping an eye on it. I think he knew something dodgy was going to be happening this year. He already caught me sneaking around once before. If he’s checking in on me tonight, he’s sure to see all of us gathered out here on the pitch. If we hop on our brooms, we can make a formation of letters and words that he’s sure to be able to read on the Marauders Map.”

“Wow,” Zane said appreciatively. “That’s Zombie-calibre thinking! Nice one! You really think it will work?”

“If Dad’s watching,” James shrugged. “He couldn’t possibly miss it.”

Longbottom studied James’ face for a long moment. Finally, he nodded curtly. “We have to be quick. Get everyone together. Before I explain, I’ll allow anyone who doesn’t want to be involved the freedom to leave. If just one person tells, though, James, it’s all over. Not just for you, but for me as well. We must both be willing to take that risk.”

James blew out a harsh breath. "It's our best chance, I think. Besides, you're the unofficial founder of Night Quidditch. I think the league will go along if you lead the way."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Longbottom muttered darkly. "Very well, then. Let's get on with it."

It took rather longer than expected. Fortunately, not a single one of the Night Quidditch players elected to leave, despite the dangers. With so many people on brooms, however, it was especially difficult to arrange into the necessary formations. James and Professor Longbottom oversaw the process, taking turns viewing the arrangement from high above, calling down instructions as necessary.

"The G is drifting," James called down, cupping his hands to his mouth against the cold wind. "Fiera, just stay next to the far ring. That's your anchor. Everyone, else, keep a tight formation. No more than arms' length from each other."

"This is harder than it looks!" Albus called up. "You try hovering between two people in a bloody hurricane without crashing into each other!"

"Turn your broom into the wind," Willow instructed. "First rule of advanced flight; there's no spell to combat wind shear."

"I'll combat whatever I want," Albus muttered loudly. "Are we almost done? What are we spelling, anyway?"

"Nearly there," Professor Longbottom announced. He broke away from the formation and swooped up alongside James. Together, they peered down at the undulating, moonlit formation of broom riders.

"GRYF FLOO 12 AM," James read aloud. "Do you think dad will understand?"

Longbottom nodded. "If he's seeing it, he'll get it. Gryffindor Floo, tomorrow, midnight. If you don't mind, James, I'd like to be there myself, and perhaps a few others. I'll spread the word. There will certainly be a few more people interested in speaking to your father, however briefly."

James glanced at the professor, realizing again the gravity of their situation. "Er, yeah. Whatever you say, Professor."

From Below, Herman Potsdam called, "How long do we need to hold this up? It's a lot less fun up here when I can't whallop Bludgers at Albus' head."

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“It’s been nearly five minutes since the message was readable,” James nodded. “If dad didn’t see us getting into position, then waiting around probably won’t make any difference.”

“Here’s hoping,” Longbottom sighed harshly and then called down, “Well done, everyone! Carefully break formation, spread out, and make your way back down to the pitch.”

Like dandelion seeds, the formation broke apart and drifted into meaninglessness. One by one, the Night Quidditch players dipped toward the frosty grass. James followed, landing on the centreline next to Professor Longbottom.

“What do you say, Professor,” Albus grinned, his cheeks red and his eyes sparkling in the moonlight. “Since we’re all out here anyway, how about a quick match?”

“Yeah!” a scattering of voices chimed in.

Longbottom shook his head. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he said, with obvious reluctance. “There’s no time. And besides, there’s no more Somnambulis potion. You all need to get back to your beds.”

His instructions were drowned out by increasingly enthusiastic appeals as more players gathered round.

Beetlebrick was wide eyed with inspiration. “We can set a target score! One hundred points! First team to get there wins! No Snitch! We’d be done in less than an hour!”

“No snitch!?” Albus interrupted stridently. “That’s not Quidditch, you heretic!”

Zane piped up, “We could field full teams with this many people! Forget houses for the night, just random squads for the fun of it! After all, the league’s been shut down. Think of it as an exposition match!”

“Enough!” Longbottom announced firmly, raising his hands. “Quiet down now, all of you!” He stopped, waiting as the gathering reluctantly fell silent. He looked around at them all, his eyes hard beneath his cowl. Finally, he drew a deep breath and shook his head. “*Seventy-five* points,” he allowed. “Snitch wins the whole match. Because Albus is right. There’s no Quidditch without the Golden Snitch.”

A rough, barely restrained cheer arose from the players, who immediately began to break up into swiftly arranged teams.

“This is totally daft,” Longbottom muttered under his breath, but James heard the smile in his voice. The professor produced his wand from the depths of his robe and pointed it at the Quidditch trunk. A bolt of

yellow unlocked the trunk and it sprang open, revealing the restlessly glowing balls inside.

“Listen close, now,” Longbottom announced, turning back to the players. “Seriously, this is it. After tonight--”

Behind him, the Quidditch trunk slammed closed with a loud clunk.

James jumped and turned toward the trunk. An old boot was planted in the centre of the lid, holding it closed. With a swish and a flourish of fabric, the boot suddenly became the bony figure of Argus Filch, his foot pressed firmly on the Quidditch trunk, the invisibility cloak fluttering in his outstretched hand. He raised his cane slowly, menacingly, in the other.

“Indeed, Professor,” he growled triumphantly. “This *is* very much *it*.”

For one long, awkward moment, Professor Longbottom merely stared at Filch, his face unreadable. Finally, he pushed the cowl back from his head and stepped forward.

“Thank you, Mr. Filch,” he said brightly. “As you can see, I have arranged this little midnight outing. Herbology club, you see. Midnight blossoms and the like. Your vigilance is appreciated, but unnecessary. I will escort the students back to the castle now that we are finished.”

“Oh, I don’t think so, Professor,” Filch breathed slowly, his grin growing even more toothy, the cane unwavering in his upraised hand. “If you’ll just hand me your wand, we can avoid any... unpleasantness.”

James felt a chill shake him to his heels. Filch had never once, in his experience, defied a teacher.

“Argus,” Longbottom said calmly. “I would hate for you to do anything you’d regret later...”

“Your wand, Mr. Longbottom,” Filch demanded in a louder voice, taking a step toward the professor. “And it is you who might be regretting things right about now. *If* you please.” He held out a horny hand, palm up.

“I would do as he says,” a thin voice instructed from the darkness. James heart lurched into his throat as he turned, straining to see past the gloom of the grandstands. A tall figure stood there, watching: Rechter Grudje, his face hidden in impenetrable shadow. “I have some very serious questions for you, Mr. Longbottom. Come along to my office.

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Perhaps we can sort this out swiftly. Perhaps it is an easily explained misunderstanding.”

Longbottom glanced around at the stunned students clustered behind him, his face resigned. “I’ll take full responsibility,” he stated. “Go with Mr. Filch back to your dormitories. There will be no detentions tonight.”

“That’s right,” Filch agreed viciously, taking the professor’s wand from him. “Teachers don’t get detentions, after all. Oh, no. Not by a long sight.”

Wind moaned through the grandstands, creaking in their dark heights. The sound mingled eerily with Filch’s monotonous, wheezy laugh.





9. THE MIDNIGHT ASSEMBLY

It was the very pit of night when James woke up.

All around, the castle was as still as a tomb. The dormitory stove had burned low, leaving the air so cold that James could see his breath rising above his bed. If he stayed awake much longer, he could watch one of the Hogwarts house elves appear to stoke the stove back to life before dawn, silent and secretive, employing its own unique magic.

James didn't know why he was suddenly awake, but he wished he wasn't. Stormy thoughts circled his head, swooping in to land as he rose to full consciousness: Professor Longbottom captured by Filch and Grudje; the uncertain message to his father; the eerily familiar Avior Dorchascathan; the malevolent Lady of the Lake and Petra's dream story...

The Collector...

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The Morrigan Web...

A low scraping sound came from the stairs. James' ears perked up and he turned his head to look. The sound had been tiny, subtle, and yet, against the dead silence of the castle, it had been as clear as a knocking footstep. He squinted into the darkness of the spiral staircase and strained his ears.

"James," a voice whispered in his ear.

He jumped, flailed in bed, and fell to the floor with a thump, taking the blankets with him. He scrambled to his knees and peered over the bed, eyes bulging.

Nastasia knelt on the other side. She looked at him with glassy, serious eyes.

"You," James breathed, trying to calm his pounding heart. "How did you...?"

"Can we go down to your common room?" she whispered earnestly.

James nodded weakly. "Fine. I'm awake anyway."

"Wait here for a minute," she said, her eyes still locked on his. "Then come down and meet me. Don't watch. OK?"

James frowned in tired annoyance. "You sneak into my dormitory and tell *me* not to watch? I already know you can change into a snake. That's it, isn't it?"

"Just..." she said in a small voice, "just don't watch. Promise me. I know you can keep your promises, so do it."

He shook his head impatiently. "Fine. I promise. Slither away." He closed his eyes and leaned on his bed.

Across from him, a shuffle sounded, and then a dry scrape, like fine chain mail dragged on stone. In her snaky form Nastasia was, in fact, remarkably quiet. The next time he heard her she was on the stairs, descending in faint, sweeping slithers.

James counted to thirty, tired to the bone but almost preternaturally awake. Then, with a sigh, he stood, scooped his robe from the hook on his bedpost, and shrugged into it as he crept down the stairs.

Nastasia was seated in the darkness by a window, barely a girl-shaped silhouette against the gloom. James joined her, plopping onto the chair across from her. He waited for her to begin.

"You kept your promise," she said.

“That’s what promises are for,” he commented curtly. “Otherwise they’re just lies.”

Nastasia laughed darkly, weakly. “Sometimes it isn’t that simple.”

James was in no mood for riddles. “So you can turn into a snake,” he stated bluntly. A thought struck him and he slapped himself on the thigh. “I guessed that!” he rasped suddenly. “Back on first night when you snuck in, I knew there was something you weren’t telling us! The cabinets were closed for human use, but somehow you got through. I told Scorpius and Rose and Ralph that you had to be an animagus or something! It was the only way! Wait until I tell them that…” he stopped himself, frowned again, then flopped back into his chair. “Right. I can’t.”

“I’m not *exactly* an animagus,” Nastasia muttered, turning her chin toward the dark window.

“I may only be a fourth year wizard,” James replied, “but I know what it’s called when a witch can turn herself into a snake. It’s called animagus. Get it? Animal and magic?”

“Is your pal Ted Lupin an animagus?” she asked suddenly, glancing back at him.

James narrowed his eyes. “What do you know about Ted?”

“I know what Zane told me. He said that Ted Lupin attacked Ralph once in the form of a wolf. But Ted’s not a werewolf. So is he an animagus?”

“Zane talks a lot, doesn’t he?” James sighed. “But no, I don’t think so. Petra said that Ted changes sometimes because of a weird combination of his werewolf dad and his metamorphmagus mum. It’s complicated. So are you telling me you’ve got a dad who’s a, what, a weresnake?”

Nastasia looked away again and drew a long, deep breath, shaking as she let it out. “Don’t be stupid.”

James waited, but Nastasia didn’t go on. “So tell,” he prodded, trying not to sound impatient, which he was. “You promised to tell me everything if I kept your secret.”

“It’s not that easy!” she whispered harshly, angrily. “I’ve only ever told one person before! It’s hard to break the seal on a secret like that! Give me a minute!”

“Fine,” James crossed his arms and slumped in his seat. “So were you there tonight, by the way? I didn’t see you.”

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“I was there,” she replied sullenly.

James nodded. “Must make it easy to sneak around that way. Slithering through the grass unseen. Slithering up the enchanted dormitory stairs without tripping the alarm hex. Sliding around through pipes and drains...”

Nastasia was quiet.

James tried a different approach. “So how long have you been able to turn into a snake?”

“I don’t turn into *a* snake,” she hissed suddenly, turning back to him. “I...”

James shrugged. “You what?”

She sighed again, briskly, as if frustrated. “It’s not...” she began, gesturing vaguely with both hands. “I’m not... what most people would think of as... normal.” She dropped her hands onto her lap and glared at James, her face tense, as if she wanted to make a joke of it and was struggling desperately not to. Her hands scrabbled over each other restlessly, like wrestling spiders. Finally, she dropped her eyes.

“Right,” James said slowly. “I think I probably could have told you that.”

“Mother Newt helps me,” Nastasia went on quietly, staring down at her hands. “She’s the only person who knows about it, and she explained it all to me. The Muggles have something sort of like it. They call it *Dissociative identity disorder*. I memorized that. I like the sound of it. The witch version is really rare. It has a name I can barely pronounce.”

James shook his head slowly. “I’m... a bit lost here, Nastasia.”

She looked up at him again. “I have... a fractured personality.” She smiled weakly. “Two of them, actually. Two versions of me, both totally different, both living in the same mind. There’s Nasti, the mean one, and there’s Ashya, the nice one. That’s simplifying things quite a bit, actually, but you get the point. I can’t control which one appears at any time. That’s pretty crazy, I suppose, isn’t it?”

“Actually,” James replied seriously, “that sort of explains quite a lot.”

“Don’t make fun of me,” she said, dropping her eyes again.

“I’m not. Really. I just...” he shrugged. “It sort of doesn’t come as a great surprise. It... sort of helps.”

Nastasia sighed again, shuddering. “In the Muggle world, they have medicines for people with more than one personality. In the magical world, they have... other methods. Mother Newt, she taught me that what I have, it doesn’t have to be a curse. She said that it’s lots different for witches than it is for Muggles. I can train both halves of my personality to work together, like partners, if they have the same ends in mind. The trick, she said, is to have very clearly defined goals, to make sure both of my... *versions*... work toward the same things.”

James was morbidly fascinated. “How do you do that?”

“Ah,” Nastasia said with a smile, glancing up at him. “That’s between me and Mother Newt.” There was a flicker in Nastasia’s gaze, a mischievous glint, and James wondered if he was seeing a glimmer of her *other* personality: Nasti. It chilled him slightly.

“So the snake thing?”

The glint in Nastasia’s eyes became a hard glare, burning in the darkness. Then, with a seeming force of will, she blinked it away. “Mother Newt says there are words for that, too, if you ask the healers at the medical college. They call it a ‘transmorphic event’. Mother Newt calls it something else. She calls it a magical release valve.”

James cocked his head. “A way to relieve pressure?”

She nodded. “It started when I was three or four years old. Normally, it takes years to learn the art of the animagus, but under certain conditions, when a witch or wizard’s brain experiences extreme stress from within, it can happen spontaneously, as a sort of escape. When both sides of my personality, Nasti and Ashya, went to war against each other, my mind couldn’t handle the strain. So it... just changed me.”

“I see,” James said slowly. “As a snake, things are much simpler, I suppose. A bit more... er, single-minded. Right?”

Nastasia shrugged and looked away. “Something like that.”

“So when the Lady of the Lake attacked Lily,” James said, narrowing his eyes, “you saw what was happening and... you were at war with yourself?”

Nastasia still did not meet James’ eyes. “I’ve learned to control it,” she answered dully. “As the years went by, I began to understand the mental muscles that made the change happen. Now, I can do it whenever I want to. It’s a pretty useful skill. Sometimes, like you say, it’s handy to be able to turn into... something else.”

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“So you fought the Lady of the Lake and saved Lily’s life.” James nodded. “I haven’t thanked you for that.”

She laughed darkly. “I’m not sure it *was* this ‘Lady of the Lake’ you’re always talking about. It doesn’t matter. But don’t thank me. Don’t ever thank me.”

“Why not?”

She looked at him sharply, piercingly. Suddenly, she slid off her chair and knelt in front of James, leaning close over the arm of his chair.

“You can’t trust me, James,” she said in a hard whisper. “Don’t you see? The parts of me, they don’t always agree. I *try* to make Nasti and Ashya work together. I really do! But I can’t always make both sides of me want the same things. I don’t always know what it is that I’m up to. And I don’t... I *can’t* trust that it’s always good.” She stopped suddenly, her face pinched into a frown of concentration. “Did I... did I tell you I would come along with you to talk to Professor Avior at Durmstrang?”

James studied her face incredulously. “Well... yes. Of course you did. You don’t remember?”

Her eyes drifted away slowly, lost in thought. “Yes...” she said vaguely. “Yes, I guess I do. But...”

There was a long pause. Finally, Nastasia shook her head wearily. “Just, be careful when you are with me, James. I’ll try to control it. I have... ways.”

“The snake,” James nodded.

“Yes,” she said, almost dismissively, her eyes growing glassy again, distant. “But not just that. There’s something else. Something I have to concentrate on, something that keeps all of me working toward the same thing.”

James suddenly felt very sad for Nastasia. For the first time, he saw her not as a capricious, manipulative pixie, but as a tortured girl with a weighty secret, struggling to keep herself-- and everyone around her-- safe from her own nightmares. In some ways, she was very similar to Petra.

He touched her lightly on the shoulder. “It can’t be that bad,” he said. “What is it you concentrate on?”

Nastasia looked into his eyes again, gravely and intently. “The thing both parts of me have agreed on since the beginning of this school year,” she answered softly. And then she kissed him. It was quick,

darting, and over before he even realized it was happening. His heart crammed up into his throat and his face heated, reddening his cheeks.

“Goodnight, James,” Nastasia said, her lips still only inches from his. “Close your eyes again. All right?”

“You’re mental,” he whispered faintly.

A smile twitched the corners of Nastasia’s mouth. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

James shook his head, his heart still pounding in his throat, his cheeks still burning. He closed his eyes.

Nastasia shrank away with a dull, complicated thump. He heard the soft rasp of her slithering as she moved away across the rugs of the common room floor, beneath the sofas and chairs. Seconds later, there was only silence.

He opened his eyes. His head was spinning, as were his emotions. He barely knew how he felt. He only knew one thing with certainty.

Nastasia’s visit certainly had not made things any simpler.



“Run, students! It’s called tag rugby, not tag standing-around-wheezing-like-old-women!” The iron voice of Tabitha Corsica, in her Yorke teacher guise, rang out over the muddy field with the assistance of an electric bullhorn.

“She’s enjoying this way too much,” Ralph panted, hands on his knees, mud staining his St. Brutus’ tee shirt all the way to the chest.

Graham nodded weakly. “It’s state-sanctioned torture, I tell you.”

James looked up to see a herd of students galloping toward them in pursuit of a terrified looking Kevin Murdoch, who held the football in

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front of him like a bomb. The mob bowled over James, Graham and Ralph, capturing them in a melee of bashing shoulders, muddy knees, and sharp elbows. James fell, tripped a particularly beefy Yorke student, and felt two more stampede across his back, their large, gratefully mud-caked cleats driving him into the mushy grass. A second later, the entire scrum collapsed onto Murdoch, burying him in a massive, grunting tackle.

“Remember, students,” Corsica called, the bullhorn turning her voice into an electric squawk. “This is *tag* rugby. But I do commend your enthusiasm. Carry on! We’ve twenty-five minutes before cool-down calisthenics!”

“You won’t believe what I just heard,” Graham moaned, limping back toward James and Ralph as the rugby scrum boiled away toward the far goal.

“Don’t tell me this is a double-period and she’s going to make us run laps after this,” Ralph begged, wide-eyed.

“Worse!” Graham spat. “Corsica’s going to be doing double teacher duty, filling in part-time at another school with an unexpected vacancy. Just heard the captain of the Yorke squad talking about it. Corsica told them about it this morning and they’re all broken up about it! They totally love her!”

“That’s impossible,” James shook his head.

“Who cares?” Ralph interjected, digging a dollop of mud out of his ear.

“They were laughing about the name of the teacher she’s filling in for,” Graham added pointedly. “A real gut-buster, they said! The teacher she’s replacing is some barmy duffer named... Longbottom!”

James startled so hard that he slipped on the mud and nearly toppled back onto the wet grass. “*Longbottom?* Are you sure?”

Graham rolled his eyes. “Pretty hard to get that name wrong, isn’t it? Corsica told them he taught at some yokel private school up north. Can you believe it?”

James shook his head slowly in wonder. “Grudje replaced Professor Longbottom already! He got the Ministry to reassign Corsica to his post!”

“He probably asked for her specifically,” Ralph said dourly. “She’d be just his sort.”

“No wonder she’s in such a good mood,” Graham sighed.

Ralph shook his head, flinging muddy water from his hair. “I wonder where Professor Longbottom is now?”

James frowned worriedly. “Probably cooling his heels in some Ministry detention centre along with Professor Revalvier. Maybe dad knows about it. If we have a chance, we’ll ask him tonight.”

A rumbling of the ground announced the return of the rugby scrum. James braced himself as the mob swept over him again, sweeping the three boys along like a sweaty, mud-spattered snowball.

From the side-line, Corsica grinned from her false, middle-aged face, her oversized glasses glinting white with the reflection of the cloudy sky.



James spent the rest of the day distracted by thoughts of the previous night, as well as hopes for the night to come. He hoped that his dad had gotten their message and would be able to get through via the Gryffindor common room floo. Further, he was worried that Filch would announce some draconian, late-night detention for all members of the Night Quidditch League, possibly interfering with the arranged midnight meeting with his father. As evening descended, however, no word came down about any punishment at all.

“Perhaps Grudje is just content to have nailed Longbottom,” Rose whispered at dinner.

“More likely Longbottom took responsibility for the whole thing,” James muttered. “The worst part is it’s all my fault. It was my idea and I talked him into it.”

Scorpius nodded loftily. “That’s true.”

“Quiet, Scorpius,” Rose chided. “The professor never would have gone along with it if he hadn’t agreed it was a good idea. There’s no point blaming yourself, James.”

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As they spoke in hushed whispers, Albus approached from the direction of the Slytherin table, walking with almost absurd, forced casualness, hands clasped behind his back, whistling loudly. He slid an eye toward James and ducked toward him, cramming between Lily and Ralph.

“So how are we going to get in tonight, eh?” he asked quietly. “You going to meet us outside the portrait hole? Or do you trust me, your own brother, enough to just give me the password?”

“Tonight?” James blinked at his brother. “You don’t mean...?”

“Indeed I do!” Albus nodded vigorously. “Beetlebrick, Fiera and the rest of Slytherin Night Quidditch, we all risked our necks to help send that message last night. We deserve to be there when dad calls just as much as you do.”

“That’s rich,” Scorpius muttered. “If you think we’re going to let you winkle your way into the Gryffindor common room, you’re even more daft than I thought.”

Albus’ face darkened. “You watch yourself, Malfoy. I still haven’t forgotten our first train ride together, or what happened on the day of granddad’s funeral. Somebody owes you a good thrashing.”

“You’re still jealous that the Sorting Hat sent me to dear old dad’s house and you got tossed to the snakes,” Scorpius grinned humourlessly. “Isn’t that right, *Asp*?”

“Stuff a sock in it, both of you!” Lily exclaimed, pushing the boys apart.

“Wotcha,” Kendra Korner whispered suddenly, sticking her head between James and Ralph. “What time tonight? Midnight on the dot? Me and the other Hufflepuffs were thinking we’d skive out of astronomy club early and be there at half past eleven. What say?”

James boggled at her in horror.

“I say this is getting silly,” Rose said with a brisk sigh. “Look, Kendra, we can’t have two dozen people sneaking into the Gryffindor common room at midnight tonight.”

Albus leaned over the table intently. “You can’t just freeze all the rest of us out. We totally helped. You Gryffindors are always trying to take all the credit.”

Kendra nodded. “It’s not a bit fair, James. You have to let at least me and Albus in.”

“Budge up, Malfoy,” Herman Potsdam suddenly announced, forcing his considerable frame between Scorpius and Lily. He glanced seriously around the table. “This is about tonight, right? What time are we meeting?”

James threw up his hands in exasperation. “All of you are going to ruin everything. You know that, right?”

Ralph shrugged. “They did help, James,” he said. “It’s only fair that you let them be in on the conversation.”

“I don’t even know that dad got the message!” James hissed. “This could all be for nothing!”

“We should probably tell a teacher or two,” Albus suggested, ignoring James. “I heard Professor Longbottom say last night that McGonagall and Flitwick are in on the anti-Grudje rebellion.”

“Shh!” James hushed suddenly. He glanced quickly toward the head table, expecting to see Grudje watching. Instead, fortunately, the headmaster seemed to be virtually asleep, his fingers steepled, his eyes closed serenely. James heaved a brief sigh of relief. “We can’t just go around talking to teachers about this,” he went on in a lower voice. “Professor Longbottom said that Grudje has ears everywhere, possibly even in teachers’ quarters. If word gets out, we’ll get shut down for sure.”

Rose frowned. “How would Grudje be able to hear what people are saying in their quarters?”

Ralph screwed up his face in thought. “Extendable ears, perhaps?” he suggested. “Remember those ones that Ted Lupin had last year? The ones that didn’t even have to be connected to the source?”

Scorpius shook his head. “Any competent wizard knows how to find stuff like that. If there was some magical receiver in their quarters, a simple *Ravaelio* spell would show it.”

“Either way,” James interjected, trying to keep the conversation on point, “We can’t tell any other teachers, even if we know they are on our side. Not unless we know there’s no way Grudje is listening.”

“Fine,” Albus agreed. “But you need to at least allow us three to be there. It’s only fair.” He glanced from Kendra to Herman Potsdam, both of whom nodded firmly.

James deflated. “All right, all right. Be outside the common room door at five before midnight. Someone will let you in, *assuming*,” he added, bolting upright again, “there are no Gryffindors still in the common room who don’t know what’s going on, and that you don’t get

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rounded up by Filch on the way! Remember, he's got the invisibility cloak now! If you get caught, you don't say a word about this."

"Oh," Albus blinked in mock confusion. "I assumed you'd want us to invite Filch along, perhaps draw him a custom invitation with a check-box for whether Mrs. Norris will be attending as well."

Scorpius smiled wryly at this, turning partly away so Albus wouldn't see.

"Joke all you want," Rose said, "Just don't get caught. And bring Ralph, too. He was there in New Amsterdam with us. His input will probably come in handy."

Ralph perked up to protest, then sank back, apparently realizing it would be useless.

"Score for Slytherin!" Albus chirped happily, clapping Ralph on the shoulder.

Scorpius flapped a hand at the newcomers. "All of you clear off to your tables. Grudje will smell conspiracy if you hang about here."

"That's true," Herman nodded. "Last time a Hufflepuff sat with you Gryffindors was..." he frowned in deep thought. "Actually, I don't think there was a last time."

Albus saluted briskly. "See you tonight, James. Don't keep us waiting. Come on, Ralph."

One by one, the non-Gryffindors retreated to their own tables.

"Well then," Scorpius proclaimed cheerily, grabbing a cupcake from the desert platter. "Looks like we're going to be having quite a little party."

James buried his face in his crossed arms.



At five minutes past midnight that night, James found himself on the sofa before the Gryffindor fireplace, crammed between Rose and Albus in the centre of a bubble of uncomfortable silence.

“You forgot, apparently,” Rose hissed at him, “that tonight was a Friday. No school tomorrow means loads of people staying up for no particular reason.”

James didn’t reply. There was no point. Behind them, the common room was indeed a hive of late night activity, crowded with knots of babbling students, a wizard wireless tuned to a distant Wyrd Sisters Reunion concert, and at least one raucous Winkles and Augers game. In the midst of this, as conspicuous as a third thumb, sat the gathering of Albus, Ralph, Kendra Korner, and Herman Potsdam, all hunched around the hearth with James, Rose, Lily and Scorpius.

“Do you mind?” Albus perked up suddenly, scolding Cameron Creevey as he crept curiously around the arm of the sofa. “We’re having a study group! No interruptions!”

“Albus,” Rose muttered out of the corner of her mouth. “You’re drawing more attention than you’re sending away. It’s bad enough having people from every house here for no apparent reason.”

Albus went on, undeterred as Cameron rejoined his friends at a nearby table. “We’re practicing advanced telepathy! Dangerous stuff if you don’t know how to do it. If you get within ten feet it’ll permanently scramble your brain. Seriously, you’ve been warned!”

Herman stirred uncomfortably. “It’s nearly ten past. Where is he?”

“We don’t even know he got the message,” Ralph commented. “This could all be for nothing.”

James crossed his arms stubbornly. “Give it a few more minutes. Dad just *had* to have been watching the Map. He couldn’t have missed us all out there on the pitch.”

“Maybe he was working last night,” Albus shrugged, growing bored. “Sometimes he has to, you know. Auror stuff. Happens around the clock.”

“Not lately,” Lily commented. “Titus Hardcastle has been handling a lot of the late night raids and stuff. After all, he doesn’t have a family or anything.”

“Titus is ten kinds of cool,” Albus nodded enthusiastically, turning to Herman and Kendra. “Tough as dragon claws and serious as a

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curse. He once faced a horde of inferi with nothing but a broken wand and a teakettle.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Herman shook his head. “How’d he beat them?”

Albus gave a sideways grin. “Let’s just say nobody ever brewed tea in *that* teakettle again,” he tapped his nose wisely, then added, “On account it was so dented and bloody from all those bashed inferi heads. Knocked a few of them clean off!”

“Ugh,” Kendra rolled her eyes.

Lily poked Albus in the ribs with her elbow. “That’s totally made up.”

“Not at all!” Albus protested. “Titus told me himself! He even kept one of the inferi heads! Stores it in a little trunk in his bedroom and makes it sing Scottish lullabies to him on nights he can’t get to sleep.”

“If it’s not true,” Scorpius mused, “it sure should be.”

“Look,” Ralph pointed suddenly at the hearth. “Somebody’s coming through!”

Sure enough, the coals of the fireplace were shifting and rearranging. Sparks crackled as a shape began to emerge. As one, the students scrambled from the couch and chairs, gathering around the fire in a nervous huddle.

A face emerged from the coals and grinned up at them. “Well! This is quite the little party, isn’t it?”

“That’s what I said,” Scorpius agreed, glancing aside at James.

“Uncle Ron?” James said.

“Dad!” Rose cried, delighted. “We weren’t expecting to see you!”

“I wasn’t expecting to be seen,” Ron shrugged. “Got a last minute message from Harry that you lot were keen to talk. Said something about a message you sent through the Marauder’s Map. I didn’t even know that was possible.”

“Uncle Ron,” James asked seriously, shouldering his way forward. “Where’s my dad? Why didn’t he contact us himself?”

“What, your old Uncle Ron not good enough for you?” Ron asked, feigning offense.

“Dad,” Rose chided. “This is serious. We have loads of important stuff to tell you.”

Ron nodded. “OK, seriously then.” To James he said, “Your dad’s been sent off on some international diplomatic hoo-hah, standing

guard and looking official while a group of ambassadors sign this and shake hands about that. He's been assigned to loads of those sorts of jobs lately, leaving Titus to manage the day-to-day operations."

"What?" Albus exclaimed, "Still? But Dad's head Auror! He's the one should be sending others off on those sorts of busy jobs."

"Believe me," Ron concurred. "It's no fun for any of us. Titus isn't exactly a bundle of tickles, even when he's not in charge of the office. The Minister himself has been requesting Harry personally, though. Not every nation has a Harry Potter to trot out, scar and all."

"Dad," Rose interrupted, leaning close to the fire. "Filch has gone off the deep end. The new headmaster has given him all sorts of authority *and* the magical powers to back it up."

"And they shut down the post," Lily added. "We can't send anything anywhere without it being read by Grudje first!"

"And Uncle Ron," James said earnestly, lowering his voice to a near whisper. "We went to New Amsterdam! It was by accident, but when we were there we ran into this really creepy wizard who calls himself the Collector! He enslaved a bunch of Muggles and forced them to help make some horrible magical weapon! And he's not alone! We think he's working with that escaped prisoner, Worlick, and maybe even... er..." He stopped himself, remembering that his uncle, like most people, didn't exactly believe in the Lady of the Lake.

"We saw Viktor Krum," Ralph chimed in. "He can back up what we say. He and the Harriers battled the monsters that that Collector bloke sent after us!"

"Wendigos" Rose clarified enthusiastically. "Vicious old native American monsters! They were awful!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Ron said, shaking his head and squeezing his eyes shut. "This is a load of stuff and I'm just trying to keep up. You say Filch is using magic?"

James took a deep breath, glancing around at the others. More slowly this time, they took turns explaining everything that had been happening at the school, including Lily's and Scorpius' punishment and Professor Longbottom's dismissal. Ron listened intently, his expression growing increasingly grave. When they were finished, he said, "Security has been clamped down everywhere, but this is taking things quite a bit too far. No one has any excuse to be screening the post. And your dad will be extremely unhappy that his cloak ended up in the hands of Filch.

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I'd be expecting a strongly worded communique about that if I was Mr. Grudje."

"But dad," Rose pressed, "what about what we saw in New Amsterdam? Like Ralph said, Viktor Krum can back us up on this. He interviewed one of the Muggles that the Collector had enslaved. She's the one that told us about the Morrigan Web."

Ron shook his head dourly. "We'll check in with Viktor, believe me. But the Morrigan Web... that's just a myth, a scary tale to frighten children. It's not a real thing."

"I've done research, Dad," Rose interjected pointedly.

"You and your mum," Ron exclaimed in exasperation, although James felt sure there was a note of pride in his uncle's voice. "All right, so what did you find out?"

Rose explained her discovery of the historical Alma Aleron professor, Principia Laosa, and her discovery of the mythical Morrigan Web. "Apparently there's a witch that lives in the bowels of Alma Aleron's administration hall named Crone Laosa. She might be related to the original Professor Laosa and have some information about what the Morrigan Web does and how it might work."

Ron was already shaking his head. "You lot are totally incorrigible, you know that?" he sighed to himself. "Now I know how mum must have felt when Harry, Hermione and I were kids. Blimey, it's hard work being the responsible one."

"But Uncle Ron," James insisted, "Zane's already figured a way for us to get down into the basements of Alma Aleron to find Crone Laosa, if she really exists. If this Collector wizard really is planning to set off some magical super-weapon--"

"Then your dad and Titus Hardcastle and the rest of us will stop him," Ron interrupted. "Really! What do you lot think you're going to do that loads of grown and trained Aurors and Harriers can't?"

"So..." Ralph said slowly, "Does that mean... you believe us?"

Ron turned to look at Ralph from the coals of the fireplace. "Is that what this is about? You think us grown-up types don't trust you because you're just a lot of kids?"

Ralph shrugged and glanced around at the others. "Well... it crossed our minds, I guess."

"Look," Ron said, lowering his voice and looking at each face in turn. "Remember just who you're talking to here, eh? I ain't so old that

I've forgotten what it's like to be on that side of the floo. We know there are some seriously sketchy things going on at Hogwarts, as well as in the Ministry proper. Frankly, there are some bloody good reasons why security has been cranked up as high as it has. Ever since that whole mess in New Amsterdam, the vow of secrecy has started falling apart all over the place. Why do you think there've been all these annoying diplomatic missions all over the world for your dad to attend?" he asked, looking at James, Albus and Lily. "Muggle governments are catching wind of our existence. Difficult questions are being asked. Slipshod, temporary treaties are being signed. Worse..."

Ron paused, looking earnestly around at the gathered students, as if unsure whether to go on. He lowered his voice again so that it was barely above a whisper. "Worse, there are reports that Muggle governments are already being infiltrated by dark witches and wizards, looking to gain the upper hand wherever they can. The ones that use Imperius curses and polyjuice potions, they're the easiest to find. Potions leave a trail of evidence, and curses can be sensed by competent Aurors like us. But some of these wizards are really cunning, leaving no trail whatsoever. If they get a foothold in a major Muggle government, well... there's no telling the disasters they could wreak."

James looked askance at Rose and Scorpius, his face pale. "That's why we need to find out everything we can about the Morrigan Web," he whispered, turning back to his uncle. "It might be part of just that sort of plan!"

"We'll look into it, James," Ron nodded. "Trust me. You lot have already done your part. If there's anything to be concerned about, we'll uncover it. It's our jobs, after all."

"But--" Rose said.

"No buts!" her father exclaimed, overriding her. "*Your* job is to lay low, keep a watch on the goings on there at school, and report back to us when you can. We'll discuss it soon, over the holidays. For now, maintain a low profile, stick to your studies, and stay out of Filch's way."

Albus nodded. "I'll definitely put that one on my to-do list."

"Don't be glib, Albus," Ron said seriously. "And who the bloody hell are all these other people?"

"Herman Potsdam, sir," Herman announced. "Ravenclaw. A pleasure to meet you. I've read all about you."

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Kendra turned toward him. “*You’ve* read those stories? I don’t believe it.”

“They helped us send the message to dad,” James explained with a sigh. “They’re safe.”

Ron considered this and seemed to accept it. “All right then. To bed with all of you. And remember what I said! I’m not brushing you off-- you have an important role to play. But let us do our part and we can all work together. Understood?”

James nodded tiredly. The others joined in.

“Good, then,” Ron smiled. “Everyone else sends their greetings, and Rose, Hugo wanted you to know that he’s taken over your room completely for his pet garden gnomes and there’s nothing you can do about it. His words, not mine.”

Rose looked mortified. “Dad!”

“We’ll see most of you come Christmas, which will be here before you know it. Remember what I said!”

“We will,” the students agreed unenthusiastically. A moment later, the coals of the hearth crackled into senselessness. Ron had gone.

“Well,” Albus said with a shrug. “That was fun, I guess. Come on, Ralph, let’s get back to the dungeons. Fiera, Beetlebrick and the rest will want an update. For whatever it’s worth.”

As they all clambered to their feet, Kendra caught James’ eye. “So, that story about you lot going to New Amsterdam and running into some vicious wizard, that wasn’t just a ruse to cover up for you missing Quidditch try-outs?”

“It wasn’t *just* that,” Scorpius answered. “But it did provide James with a convenient excuse.”

Herman tilted his head sceptically. “The Morrigan Web, eh? This Collector person is probably as loony as a Lobalug. Your uncle’s right. It’s probably nothing.”

“Those Wendogoes weren’t nothing,” Rose said with a shudder.

Albus shrugged. “If you ask me, this whole thing was a bust. I don’t see why we had to go to so much trouble just to have a chin wag with Uncle Ron.”

“It was *supposed* to be Dad,” James insisted.

Lily sighed. “He would have said the same stuff, most likely. He and Uncle Ron are in the same boat, you know, working at the Department of Aurors.”

“But Dad’s *head* Auror,” James sulked. “Uncle Ron is a coordinator.”

Rose perked up at that. “What’s that supposed to mean? Are you calling my dad a desk donkey?”

“No, no, Rose,” Lily replied quickly. “His job’s super important, too! My dad couldn’t do anything without your dad following all those potion trails, coordinating interviews with shady witches and wizards, tracing Gringotts transactions, all of that sort of thing.”

Rose sighed weakly. “He is a bit of a desk donkey, isn’t he?”

Albus threw an arm around his cousin’s shoulders. “But he’s the best bloody desk donkey there is. And Lily’s right. Dad says he couldn’t do anything with him. If anything, your dad knows more about what’s going on behind the scenes than even my dad does.”

“Well,” Kendra commented, “if this is a peek into the exciting world of Potter family adventures, I think I’ll happily give it a pass from now on.” She angled toward the door, shaking her head.

“Next time just come and chat with me,” Herman agreed. “I can tell you the same stuff your uncle said and save us all a cauldron of trouble.”

James plopped back onto the sofa as Herman followed Kendra, Albus and Ralph out the portrait hole. It clapped shut behind them.

“What was that all about?” an eager voice begged. James glanced aside as Cameron bounded onto the sofa next to him. “That was Ron Weasley in the hearth, wasn’t it? I heard Willow Wisteria talking about the message you sent last night out on the Quidditch pitch! That was dead brilliant!”

“So much for ‘nobody talks about Night Quidditch,’” James sighed.

“Leave it be, Cameron,” Scorpius announced warningly. “You didn’t see anything.”

“Oh, I know!” Cameron enthused. “You can totally trust me! My lips are sealed! So what did he say? What’s going on?”

Rose shook her head. “He said to stick to our studies, let the grown-ups do their jobs, and stay out of Filch’s way.”

“Oh,” Cameron blinked. “Well. That’s... pretty good advice, I guess.”

A few minutes later, James bid the others goodnight and climbed wearily to the fourth years’ dormitory. It occurred to him that they had

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not quite mentioned *everything* to Uncle Ron. He hadn't mentioned the fact that the words *The Morrigan Web* had appeared on Petra's magical parchment, her former dream story, along with a name he did not recognize: Marshall Parris. In fact, he hadn't told anyone about that, since he had promised Petra to keep the dream story a secret.

But they had also failed to mention the mysterious Durmstrang professor Avior and his uncanny resemblance to the deceased Albus Dumbledore. Considering everything else, it was probably the least of their concerns. And yet, as James changed into his pyjamas and settled onto his four poster, his mind warring sluggishly against the exhaustion of his body, he couldn't help wondering if Professor Avior was not, somehow, the greatest and most important mystery of all.

Snatches of remembered voices followed James uneasily into sleep...

It would be best, Mr. Potter, Professor Avior's voice instructed calmly, almost kindly, *if you did not tell your father about this. Harry might be a bit... conflicted...*

You can't trust me, Nastasia pled in a sort of desperate whisper. *Don't you see? The parts of me, they don't always agree...*

But the voice that chased him into sleep was his own father's, from several weeks earlier: *It was Petra, son... Petra Morganstern... she flickered on and off... and then... she was just gone...*



The final weeks before Christmas holiday unwound like a Weasley's Wizard Wheeze's trick clock whose hands moved slower with each passing minute.

The last week of class at Durmstrang was cancelled due to inclement mountain weather ("Nine feet of snow and sixteen-inch icicles that grow *sideways* because of the wind!" Kendra regaled them breathlessly,

having overheard a conversation between Hagrid and Professor Debellows. “*Sideways icicles! Can you imagine?*”).

Classes at Beauxbatons, on the other hand, had ended a week earlier due to differences in holiday schedules (“They take almost a month for Christmas,” Graham announced wistfully at dinner one evening. “A whole month! *And* they spend half that time fairy-skiing and quaffing spiced hot chocolate in the Alps! That’s it, I’m going to see about transferring there full time.”)

James did not at all mind missing his Beauxbatons class-- he still did not grasp the slightest thing about Theoretical Arithmetics, with its monstrous abaci and its inexplicable goals, despite the constant, smug explanations offered by Yorke’s Morton Comstock, who enjoyed an eerie (and annoying) affinity for it.

He was, however, disappointed to be shut off from Durmstrang for the final week. He had finally made up his mind to visit Professor Avior in his offices, as per the professor’s suggestion, and was rather nervous about it. Now that he had decided to go through with it, he wanted it to be over as soon as possible, and did not relish worrying about it all through the holiday.

To that end, he had once attempted to make the trip through the Durmstrang cabinet on his own, class or no class, despite the warning sign nailed across its top. Waiting until the lazy hours between lunch and dinner, he had stolen up to the baroque Durmstrang cabinet door and unlatched it, only to have it blow wide open in front of him, blasting him with gale force arctic winds and stinging snow. By the time he wrestled the door closed again he was caked with nearly an inch of ice crystals, a fan of which covered the floor behind him, spreading up and over the end of the Slytherin table. Nearby, the ghost of the Bloody Baron shook his head in cruel amusement.

Classes became drudging affairs as the windows filled with blinding white snow and crisp frost, begging for snowmen to be made and snowballs to be thrown. The ceiling of the Great Hall became infused with rolling grey clouds, heavy with yet more snow to come. Fires were stoked to the maximum, so that the castle was simultaneously bitter cold (whenever one was not within twenty feet of a stove or hearth) and unbearably hot (whenever one was). As per tradition, Hagrid felled and erected a monstrous pine tree in the corner of the Great Hall, where it was busily decorated by Professor Flitwick and his first year Charms class.

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The wild scent of fresh pine needles mingled with the aroma of the warm gingerbread and peppermint cookies that filled most evenings' dessert platters.

On the last Wednesday before Christmas, James, Rose and Ralph were wending their way disconsolately toward the astronomy tower when Albus ran breathlessly up to them, his cheeks burning red in the chilly daylight.

"You'll never guess!" he panted, grinning. "We're all spending the whole holiday at the Burrow! Grandma Weasley and Uncle George and Aunt Angelina and everyone will be there! Even Luna Lovegood and that walking stick she married! No Dominique-- she's spending the holiday skiing with a load of her Beauxbatons friends, but that's no great loss, is it?"

"Really? Christmas at the Burrow?" Rose chimed excitedly. "That's excellent! How did you find out?"

"Post from Mum and Dad," he answered, fumbling a wrinkled letter from his knapsack. "Just got it this morning. Told me to spread the word to all of you. Lily and Victoire nearly split in two when I told them. I still need to find Louis, though."

"If we don't tell him does that mean he won't be there?" Rose asked, narrowing her eyes.

"Rose!" James exclaimed, stifling a laugh.

"I'm joking," she admitted reluctantly. "But if he tries to 'practice' any more of his *artis decerto* on me, I swear I'll fill his presents with slugs."

"You're invited, too, Ralph," Albus added, stuffing the letter back in his knapsack. "Your dad will be there. He signed the letter himself, along with my parents and Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione. I guess they were just trying to get all of us in one swoop, what with the hang-ups with the post."

"Does that mean Grudje read the letter before us?" James asked pointedly.

"Him or Professor Votary," Albus shrugged. "I got the letter via inter-house post. Beetlebrick delivered it from Grudje's office, since he's a prefect. But here's the kicker: we won't be going home on the Hogwarts Express!"

"What?" Ralph frowned. "Why not?"

Albus glanced excitedly from face to face. “We’re traveling by Portkey!”

“No!” Rose breathed. “But... why?”

“Your Mum pulled some strings at the Department of Magical Transportation,” Albus said. “Figured it would save loads of time trying to coordinate travel for everybody. I guess it’s good to have parents that work in high places, eh?”

“So where’s the Portkey?” James asked, a surge of excitement welling in him. “Did they send it already?”

Albus grinned. “They totally did! It came with the letter. It’s just some ratty old Christmas sweater. I think grandma Weasley made it for Uncle Ron back when he was still a student here. It won’t work until the right time, and it won’t work at all here on Hogwarts grounds. We’ll have to hitch a ride out to Hogsmeade station with everyone else and use it there.”

“So no packing, then,” Rose said thoughtfully. “We can’t carry luggage via Portkey.”

“I guess our families will bring along whatever we might need,” James suggested. “They’ll be traveling by normal means, probably.”

“Either way,” Albus concluded happily, “this is going to be bloody brilliant!”



James overslept the following Saturday morning. He was awakened by a rattling bash at the window next to his bed. Blearily, he blinked into the blinding, snowy glare, and then startled as a shape banged clumsily against it. It was Nobby, unsuccessfully scrabbling for a perch on the icy ledge outside the window. James threw off the covers, already realizing what had happened and cursing to himself.

“Sorry, Nobby!” he said, opening the window and letting in the snow-dusted bird and a gust of wintry air. “I was up too late trying to

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raise Zane on the Shard. I wanted to see if he was going to be at Burrow with us. Sorry you can't come along. Owls can't go by Portkey."

Nobby fluttered to the bedside table and shook snowflakes from his feathers. Impatiently, he stretched out his foot, revealing the note tied there. James retrieved it hurriedly.

WHERE ARE YOU? HAGRID LEAVES IN FIVE MINUTES!

It wasn't signed, but James recognized Rose's handwriting, of course. He tossed the note aside, jammed his legs into a pair of jeans, and squirreled into a sweater as he ran down the spiral staircase. On the last step, however, he remembered Petra's dream story. He was in the habit of carrying it with him everywhere he went, for reasons he did not fully understand but which felt important nonetheless. He turned on the stairs and bolted back up to the dormitory.

"Oh!" he said, spying Nobby still standing on his bedside table. The bird cocked a head at him sardonically. James shook his head and ran to the window. "Off you go. Have a good Christmas! Eat tons of mice and all that."

Nobby clucked his beak and almost seemed to roll his great, golden eyes. With a clap of his wings, he launched from the table and lofted out the window. James slammed it shut and shot the bolt. A moment later, he fell to his knees in front of his trunk and began rooting messily through it. His right hand found the lump of Petra's parchment at the same moment that his left hand brushed against an unexpected scratchy shape. He yanked both hands out and examined his left. A faint abrasion formed a white line across the back of his thumb. James frowned at it then peered into his trunk, looking for the object that had scratched him.

A small, dense shape was embedded in the hem of his school robes. James drew them out and pulled the folds apart, revealing the snared object.

"The Yuxa Baslatma," he said to himself. He remembered being snagged by the burs from the magical prophecy plant in Professor Avior's classroom, remembered the Professor confiscating them, claiming that Zane had stolen them. One of the burs, however, had remained, embedded in James' robes all this time, just waiting to be found. James

thought back to that day, tried to remember which prophecy plant the burs had come from.

“The Question Which Most Vexes You,” he whispered, his eyes widening as he stared down at the spiny brown bur.

Carefully, he extricated the bur from his robes. Glancing into the depths of his trunk again, he found a very old piece of Droobles Best Blowing Gum. He unwrapped it, popped the rock hard hunk of gum into his mouth, and then folded the bur into the wrapper.

Pocketing both Petra’s dream story and the wrapped bur in his jeans, James scrambled to his feet and pelted down the spiral stairs.



Hagrid delivered the seven of them to Hogsmeade station along with the last of the departing Hogwarts students. James jumped down from the huge carriage, joining Albus, Lily, Rose, Ralph, Louis and Victoire on the icy platform.

“Have a good Christmas, now,” Hagrid bellowed from the high driver’s seat, and then leaned aside and winked theatrically at James.

James blinked up at him. “Er, you as well, Hagrid.”

Hagrid nodded, his cheeks apple red and his wild hair matted with flecks of ice. His beetle-black eyes twinkled. “I’ll see you lot *when you get back*, then, eh?” He winked again, twice.

“Sure thing, Hagrid,” Lily replied, frowning her brow. She glanced aside at James and Rose.

Behind them, Louis hugged himself against the cold. “Come on, let’s go,” he said. “It’s cold as a banshee’s bum out here.”

“Such language,” Victoire huffed, her words forming white puffs in the air. She adjusted her little fur hat and stuffed her hands into a matching muff. “But Louis is right. This cold is no good for our complexions.”

“That’s not what I said!” Louis protested.

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“Let’s get under the awning where there’s less snow,” Albus said briskly, brandishing a soft package wrapped tightly in paper and twine. “The Portkey will be active at exactly ten o’clock.”

The troupe made their way along the snowy platform as the Hogwarts Express began to chug noisily, belting masses of black smoke into the sky. Its huge crimson wheels spun on their tracks, screeching metal on metal, and then slowed to a laborious crawl, inching the great train out of the station and steadily picking up speed. James watched the windows go by, saw the glimpsed faces of its passengers, his classmates, laughing as they settled into their seats, stuffing their coats and hats onto the overhead racks. Soon enough, the caboose swept past, dragging a pall of snow-flecked air and smoke, and the train was gone, its shrill whistle already echoing from the valley below.

“I hope you’ve been keeping a close eye on that thing,” Louis commented as Albus laid his parcel on a bench and untied the twine.

“No, I lent it out for Winkles and Augers,” Albus replied. “I let the rest of the Slytherins use it for target practice in the casting range. What do you think, genius?”

“Well,” Louis huffed, “It *is* our only means of getting home now. If the Portus spell has been altered or tampered with in any way, there’s no knowing where we’ll end up.”

Victoire shook her head in annoyance. “I’m sure Albus has been careful with it. He is not in the habit of allowing important magical tools to fall into the wrong hands.”

“You mean like James, here?” Louis said pointedly, turning to his sister. “We’ve all heard about how Filch ended up with the invisibility cloak. Real smooth, that one.”

“Belt up, Louis,” Lily said mildly, “or Rose here will belt it for you,”

Louis glanced at Rose, who glared at him. He looked back at Victoire for help, but she merely shrugged imperiously.

“What was up with Hagrid?” Ralph asked. “He sure was acting weird, wasn’t he?”

“He is Hagrid,” Victoire sniffed. “What is unusual about him acting weird?”

Just then, the bell in the Hogsmeade clock tower began to toll, its echo pealing across the bare trees and snow-crustrusted rooftops.

“That’s it,” Albus said excitedly, pulling open the wrapping and revealing a neatly folded, if somewhat threadbare old sweater. It was burgundy with a large golden letter R knitted in the centre. Albus looked from it to the others gathered round. “You’ve all travelled by Portkey before,” he said as the Hogmeade bell continued to toll. “This is it, then! Everyone grab on and hold tight!”

He reached forward, as did six other hands. Each grabbed a fistful of the old sweater. An instant later, James felt the familiar (albeit rather unpleasant) sensation of a hook grabbing his middle and tugging him sharply forward.

His last thought, as Hogmeade station whipped past him and vanished into a speck, was that he had forgotten his glasses and his mum would probably kill him for it.

A cold blur blasted over him as he held on tight to the sweater. An instant later, a hard floor materialized beneath him and he stumbled, barely keeping his footing. He let go of the sweater and banged into Victoire, knocking her hat off.

“Ouch!” she scolded shrilly. “Watch your gigantic feet! You stamped on my toes!”

“Sorry,” Ralph said, still flailing for balance. “I never get used to that.”

Albus was still holding onto the sweater in the darkness. James could barely see his brother’s face in the gloom as he peered around, his eyes tense.

“Where are we?” Albus asked. “This isn’t the Burrow. Is it?”

“I told you!” Louis exclaimed. “The Portkey got damaged somehow! Who knows where we ended up?”

“Quiet, Louis!” Lily scolded worriedly.

“It looks like an attic,” Rose commented, moving slowly forward. She pushed a mass of draping cloth aside. It fell heavily, throwing up a cloud of dust and revealing a round window, opaque with grime and pale with daylight.

“It *is* an attic,” James said, joining Rose near the window. “But it’s not the Burrow, that’s for sure.” He reached toward the window, meaning to rub the grime off and peek out, when a long, juddering creak came out of the darkness behind them.

All seven students jumped and gasped, turning toward the sound. There was nothing to be seen but a steeply canted roof on both sides,

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leading into impenetrable shadows. Then, creakily, footsteps began to approach out of the dark.

“Wands!” Victoire whispered sharply. James heard her, sensed her whisking hers out of her muff. He scrambled for his own, as did the others. Slowly, they backed away from the darkness as the footsteps grew closer, thumping slowly on the old wooden floor. James felt the cold glass of the window against his back as he bumped against it. He raised his wand shakily in his outstretched fist. Next to him, Ralph’s wand vibrated in his hand, its lime green tip bobbing against the dark.

A pair of large, naked feet began to emerge from the shadows, followed by surprisingly short, knobbly legs and a filthy old loincloth. As the figure emerged fully into the light it peered up at the students, its squinty eyes showing nothing but weary patience. It was holding a platter in its right hand, laden with seven steaming mugs.

“Mulled cider for the young masters and mistresses,” it said in a deep, croaking voice. As a sort of reluctant afterthought, it added, “and may I be the first to wish them all... a happy Christmas.”

“Kreacher!” Lily burst out in relief. “Is it really you?”

James shook his head, caught between barking anger and laughing out loud. “But... where are we then?”

“Yes,” Victoire demanded, jamming her fists onto her hips. “This is not the Burrow.”

“Humblest apologies, masters and mistresses,” Kreacher grumbled, dipping his head perfunctorily. “It was your parents’ idea. There will be no Christmas at the Burrow this holiday, despite what you-- and many others-- have been led to believe. I am afraid you will instead be spending it here... at number twelve Grimmauld Place.”





10. A CLANDESTINE CHRISTMAS

“I can’t believe you forgot your glasses,” Ginny Potter shook her head stridently, unpacking her suitcase and separating a pile of clothes for James and Albus. “If you only wore them when you’re supposed to you wouldn’t go leaving them behind when you travel on holiday!”

“I knew you’d blow a cauldron about that,” James sighed, standing back as his mother moved about the room, socking folded clothes into dresser drawers and levitating the suitcases onto a high shelf. “I woke up late, Mum. I barely had time to get dressed. You’re lucky I’m wearing pants!”

“And yet somehow you managed to remember your wand,” his mother commented sharply. She shoved a pile of folded clothes into his

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arms and turned to Rose, who was watching from the hall with a smug smile on her face. “Rose, does James wear his glasses to class?”

“It’s never happened once,” Rose answered immediately.

Ginny turned back and glared at her son.

“She’s not even *in* most of my classes!” James insisted. “How would she even know?”

Albus stepped past Rose and scooped a pile of his own clothes off the bed. “I don’t think he’s worn them once since school started,” he commented airily. “I keep telling him he’s supposed to. I keep telling him ‘there’s no magical cure for poor vision’.”

“You do not!” James exclaimed furiously.

“Enough!” Ginny shook her head. To James, she said, “You wear those glasses when you are supposed to or I’ll tell your father and he’ll permanently hex them to your face. And you,” she turned to Albus, “Don’t be a rabble-rouser. The day you give helpful advice is the day I win the Quidditch World Cup.” With that, she strode out of the room, James, Rose and Albus on her heels.

“So why are we here at Grimmauld Place instead of the Burrow, Mum?” Albus asked, unperturbed.

She sighed, “Ask your father. Or any of your uncles. This was all their plan. Not that I disagree,” she added. “It’s just that they can explain it better, if they choose to explain it at all.”

Rose glanced at James and Albus, and then turned toward the stairs, taking them two at a time. Albus and James gave chase, pounding down the steps in her wake. Ralph was on the second floor landing with Lily, both peering at the portrait of old Mrs. Black in her curtained alcove.

“She’s restless lately,” Lily was saying, “Not as hateful and filthy as she used to be when she would just scream and curse about half-bloods in her house. But still, ever since the Night of the Unveiling...”

James paused on the landing and glanced at Mrs. Black in her frame. Years before, the family had accidentally discovered that the hateful portrait could be mollified with Muggle television, and had hurried to have one painted right into her canvas. Normally, the chat shows and courtroom dramas kept her in a sort of trance-like fugue. Now, however, she muttered to herself in agitation, occasionally awakening enough to glance out of her frame, recoiling in horror at the sight of those on the landing.

“Desecration,” she hissed, her eyes darting from the painted, flickering television to Ralph and Lily. “*Impure...* House of my fathers...”

James looked closer at the television in her painting. On it, a news program warbled away, showing a scene of world leaders gathering at a long table. It was entirely possible, James thought, that his own father had appeared on the news, standing in the background as agreements were signed, shoring up the Vow of Secrecy with suspicious Muggle governments. Perhaps this was what was agitating old Mrs. Black.

“The wizard and Muggle worlds are closer together than they have been in centuries,” a man’s voice commented from nearby. James turned, as did the others, to see his uncle Percy, his eyes grave as he studied the painted television. “Walburga Black is not the only person who senses this. We are living in interesting times, children.”

“Hi Uncle Percy,” Lily said, approaching the man and putting her arms around him. Percy hugged her, and then looked around at the others. James thought-- and not for the first time-- that his Uncle had changed quite a lot since the death of his adopted daughter, Lucy. His pompousness had been replaced with a sort of dull gravity, a haunted look that was never fully absent from his gaze.

“Molly and your Aunt Audrey and I just arrived. They’re still down in the kitchen,” he offered a wan smile. “Looks like it will be rather cramped quarters this holiday, doesn’t it? It’s a good thing we all like each other.”

Albus shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind if James had stayed back at Hoggies. He snores.”

“I do not,” James shoved his brother. “You’re feet stink so bad it’s like that time those Flobberworms died under your bed.”

“Stop,” Lily said soothingly, stepping between her brothers as Percy proceeded up the steps. “There’s no point in arguing. You’re *both* right.”

Behind them, Rose tramped down the remaining stairs. “I’m going to see what this is all about.”

“Rosie!” a man’s voice called as she passed the sitting room. Rose grinned and angled through the archway, followed by James and Ralph. Inside, the hearth burned with Goblinfire, crackling almost inaudibly and making no smoke whatsoever. Seated around it on a scattering of old, miss-matched furniture were three of the Weasley brothers, Ron, Bill and

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Charlie. Luna Lovegood was also there, draped languidly across the lap of her new husband, Rolf Scamander, who sat bolt upright in a tall wingback chair, his thick glasses magnifying his eyes into an expression of perpetual surprise.

“Dad!” Rose cried, throwing herself onto her father’s lap.

“Uncle Bill! Uncle Charlie!” Albus grinned, striding toward the sofa and squeezing between his uncles.

“You little rogue!” Bill smiled, tousling his hair roughly. “How are things in the dungeons? You keeping those Slytherin snakes in line?”

Charlie elbowed Albus affectionately. “Heaven knows they need a Potter there to remind them of what’s what.”

“I’m afraid times have changed, dear Uncles,” Albus replied mournfully. “It’s the Gryffindors who are all sneaky and underhanded these days. Why just a few weeks ago, James nearly got us all thrown out of school for being out after hours, sending illicit messages and whatnot.”

“We heard about that,” Bill said, gesturing toward Ron. “That was some brilliant thinking, James. You do the Order proud.”

James smiled at his uncle and felt a blush rise to his cheeks. “The Order?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Shush, all of you,” Luna said, raising her mug. “It’s Christmas. Let’s not speak of such things.”

“For now, at least,” Ron agreed. He smiled at Rose, who snuggled on his lap. “How was the Portkey?”

“Fine,” she replied. “But Grandma Weasley will probably leather you with a hex for using your old sweater. So why are we meeting here instead of the Burrow like we were supposed to?”

“Nothing wrong with old Grimmauld Place,” Bill answered heartily. “I daresay Kreacher makes it nearly as festive as a chestnut. Why, when we arrived he had those old house elf heads singing Christmas carols.”

“No!” Albus exclaimed. “He’s been trying to do that for years but Mum never allows it!”

Luna smiled. “She’s been a bit busy trying to arrange for us all to be here. Still, I do rather like the singing. It’s curiously... unconventional.”

Behind her, Rolf nodded meaningfully. James knew why: few people appreciated-- or identified with-- the curiously unconventional as much as Luna Lovegood-Scamander.

“Seriously,” James said, plopping onto the arm of the sofa next to his uncle Bill. “Why here? You lot sent Albus a letter saying we’d be traveling by Portkey to the Burrow, and then you brought us all here instead. And just now you mentioned ‘the Order’...”

“Last minute change of plans,” Charlie stated, waving a hand in the air. “Your dad suggested it a few days ago and we all loved the idea. Enough said, and here we all are.”

“And Goblinfire in the hearth,” Rose said, perking up on her father’s lap and narrowing her eyes. “No smoke for the chimney.”

“Extremely dodgy,” Albus agreed, turning to look closely at his Uncle Charlie. “You’re hiding something. What is it?”

“Poppycock,” Ron said firmly. “Stop being so bloody suspicious, all of you. There’re more bedrooms here than there are at the Burrow, it’s as simple as that. And we’ve charmed the attic to function as a dormitory for the lot of you. You saw it when you first arrived.”

“If you charmed the attic,” Rose said, cocking her head, “you don’t have much of an idea of what a dormitory is.”

“Bloody hell,” Ron muttered, climbing to his feet and depositing his daughter onto the chair behind him. “I thought Hermione was doing it. And she likely thought *I* was doing it. And now she’s out helping Ted Lupin get a tree. Seriously, though, she’s much better at furniture transfiguration than me...”

He started for the archway, and then stopped, glancing back sternly. He pointed at the three students one by one. “All of you, keep your noses to yourselves. There’s nothing suspicious going on--” he stopped, seeing the look on Rose’s face. “And I’m totally wasting my breath, aren’t I?”

“You’ve never been able to lie, Dad,” Rose shook her head. “Sorry. You’re just too honest by nature. Leave it to Uncle Charlie.”

“Damn right,” Charlie agreed, hoisting a mug of cider. “Let them be, Ron. They’ll find out soon enough. We bloody would have when we were their age.”

Ron fumed silently for a moment, and then seemed to resign himself with a shake of his head. “Luna’s right,” he shrugged. “It’s Christmas. Let’s not speak of such things.” He sighed deeply and gave a small smile. “I’ve got an attic to transfigure. Who wants to help?”

“I’m in,” Albus jumped up eagerly. “I want quadruple bunks, all the way to the ceiling, James on the very bottom.”

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“James? Rosie?” Ron prompted.

“No thanks,” James said, getting to his feet. “I want to go say hi to everyone else.”

“Me too,” Rose said quickly, joining him.

Ron rolled his eyes. “You’re both as transparent as ghosts. Fine. Go see what secrets you can dig up. But I’m telling you, you’re wasting your time.”

In that, it turned out Uncle Ron was quite right.

Grandma Weasley, to no one’s surprise, was in the kitchen, surrounded by brilliant sunbeams from the high windows and the warm scent of baking. Bowls stirred themselves busily on the butcher block while a huge wooden spoon swiftly dolloped raw cookie dough onto baking pans. Fleur was with her, looking unnecessarily spritely in an immaculate white apron, her blonde hair pulled back in festively ribboned pigtails.

“Good morning, James, Rose,” Grandma Weasley sang delightedly, dusting her hands on her apron and drawing them into a mutual, crushing embrace. “So good to have you all here! Where are the others?”

“Mostly upstairs,” Rose smiled, squeezing her grandmother as tightly as she could. “Turning the attic into a hostel.”

Fleur commented briskly, “With all ze magic zey are pouring into zis ‘ouse it’s a wondair it doesn’t grow legs and dump us all straight out onto ze street. Adding floors, enlarging zis, reducing zhat. It is more than an old ‘ouse can take!”

“Who’s enlarging things and adding rooms and floors?” James asked as casually as he could, but his grandmother merely flapped a hand at him.

“Never you mind that. If you’re going to hang about the kitchen, we can use your help, both of you. It’s no small task cooking and baking for a family this size, especially with all these extra visitors and unexpected guests.”

“Who’s unexpected?” Rose pressed. “Are there even more people coming?”

“And where’s dad?” James added. “Don’t tell me he’s traveling again?”

“Zese are questions for your uncles,” Fleur shook her head, hefting the pan of cookies and opening the oven with a flick of her wand. “Zey’ll tell you everyzing you need to know.”

James rolled his eyes. “We already asked them! They didn’t tell us anything.”

“Well then I guess you don’t need to know, do you?” Grandma Weasley replied curtly. “Now off with you or get to work. Which will it be?”

The answer was obvious. James and Rose darted through the sunlit kitchen and pulled open the cellar door with a creak. They tromped down the wooden stairs into murky dark.

The cellar had once been a ramshackle dining area. Now, the ancient table had been replaced with a collection of old sofas and chairs, forming a comfortably shabby common room, all centred round an enormous, rusty stove. To James, the cramped, low room felt rather a lot like the basement game room of his old Alma Aleron residence, Bigfoot House.

Voices echoed from near the glowing stove.

“Grudje has ultimate say when it comes to the faculty,” George Weasley was saying darkly. “I doubt even Harry can talk the Minister out of it.”

“Harry’s persistent,” a woman’s voice answered. “Besides, the law is the law.”

As James and Rose approached, they saw Angelina, George’s wife, seated next to him on the couch. She glanced up at them and smiled.

“Just in time! Good morning James, Rose! And Merry Christmas!”

“You, too, Aunt Angelina,” Rose sighed in frustration. “Are you two going to tell us what’s going on?”

“Why should anything be going on?” Uncle George replied, staring tensely into the glow of the stove.

James threw himself onto a nearby chair. “Don’t *you* start. You of all people, Uncle George.”

“We won’t tell you what your presents are no matter how many times you ask,” Angelina teased.

“What’s going on with Uncle Harry and Headmaster Grudje,” Rose sighed, sinking to the couch next to Angelina. “And have you heard

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what a nightmare he is, by the way? He's given Filch some magical cane and set him free on his own little reign of terror."

Angelina nodded, her smile growing dark. "We've heard all about it. Believe me."

"Here he comes," George suddenly said, jumping forward and grabbing the handle of the stove door. With a screech, he wrenched it open, revealing the glowing coals inside. James peered into the nearly blinding glare, expecting to see a face appear there. Instead, the coals flared brilliant green and flashed with flame. A figure popped incongruously out of the small space, bringing a wreath of green flames with it. When the flames evaporated, Harry Potter was standing there, dressed in his winter cloak, a natty suit peeking from beneath it.

"Dad!" James proclaimed, jumping up. He moved to his father's side, only now realizing how much he had missed him.

"James," his father greeted him warmly, throwing an arm firmly around his shoulders and squeezing. A moment later, the stove glowed bright green again and Harry drew his son aside, making room. Another figure popped out of the flames, this one decidedly more bedraggled-looking, his hair lank and dark, hanging in his face. As he straightened and swept his bangs aside, James recognized the figure and gasped.

Rose jumped up. "Professor Longbottom!" she cried.

The professor smiled wearily and shook ash from his shoulders. "Do I smell cookies?" he asked faintly. "I'm perfectly starved."



"It isn't that it's secret," Harry Potter explained later, walking from room to room on the third floor with James, Rose and Ralph on his heels. "It just isn't anything you'd be interested in. It's just business."

"But you're *head Auror*, Uncle Harry," Rose countered, following Harry into a corner bedroom. "Your business is totally exciting! Seriously!"

Harry smiled at her, and then waved his wand slowly around the room, scanning it with pale purple light. James recognized it as a Ravaelio spell, meant to uncover hidden objects or secrecy charms. Harry spoke as he swept the room. "You'd be amazed how dull an Auror's job can be, Rose. Just ask your father. Tomorrow night's meeting really will be dead boring. I would skip out on it myself if I could. Come and join you in the attic and play Winkles and Augers or Exploding Snap. Count yourselves lucky."

"I don't believe that for a second," James pressed firmly. "What's with all the secrecy then? Leading everyone else to believe we'll be at the Burrow, smokeless Goblinfire in the hearth, security sweeping every room. This is more than regular old Ministry business."

"I didn't say it wasn't serious," Harry replied mildly. "I just said it would be boring. It isn't like the old days when there was a single evil bent on world domination. In some ways that was easier. I'd sooner put out one giant inferno than a thousand little brush fires."

"What about the Collector?" Ralph asked, watching as Harry inspected a suspiciously glowing drawer revealed by the purple light. "He sure seemed bent on some pretty evil world domination."

Harry pulled open the drawer, revealing a tiny poltergeist in the shape of a fat, horse-faced woman with bat wings. It glared up at Harry, grabbed a pair of tarnished spoons larger than itself and began to bash them together noisily. "Viktor Krum told me about that," Harry said, raising his voice over the clanging spoons. "He and the Harriers are still in New Amsterdam keeping an eye on Merlinus' staff, which is still stuck fast in the footpath. It's boring work guarding an old stick. If this Collector person shows up again, believe me, they'll know it." He tapped the Poltergeist with his wand, surprisingly gently, and the tiny spectre dropped the spoons with a clatter. Its eyes crossed and it keeled backwards into the drawer, seemingly asleep. Harry shook his head at it. "Daft things are popping up in the strangest places, lately. Harmless enough, if a bit of a nuisance."

"Dad," James said earnestly. "The man calls himself *the Collector*. He enslaved a bunch of poor Muggles and made them help him build something, possibly a super-weapon of some kind called the Morrigan Web. He said he had a Warlock helping him."

"That's what Warlocks do," Harry commented, passing James as he headed back into the hall. "Magical warfare is their job description."

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But seriously James, there're almost none of them left. Most were imprisoned years and years ago, back when the Deathaters all started turning each other in to save their own skins. I'd sooner believe this Collector bloke has a pink unicorn than a Warlock partner."

"But what if it's that vicious spod that escaped Azkaban?" James persisted, following his father down the hall. "Worlick! The whole reason you captured him was that he was brewing up all sorts of evil dark spells and potions, right? And then the Lady of the Lake breaks him out of prison! What if he's one of the last Warlocks around and they needed him to help make the worst magical weapon of all, the Morrigan Web?"

Harry stopped in the hall and looked back at his son. "Who's 'they'?"

James paused. "Well, the Lady of the Lake and the Collector. We think... well, *I* think they may be working together."

Harry studied his son for a long moment, and then looked around at Rose and Ralph. "When I was a boy," he said, giving them his full attention, "I didn't tell the adults in my world everything I knew. I didn't talk about the basilisk I heard hissing in the walls. I didn't ask for help deciphering Tom Riddle's diary. I kept Dobby's attempts to 'help' me mostly to myself. And do you know why?" He raised his eyebrows. "Because I feared no one would believe me. Growing up in the family that I did... well, let's just say that it didn't lead to a particularly high opinion of the trustworthiness of adults."

Harry turned and dropped to one knee, drawing his son, Rose and Ralph closer. "You lot are better than I was then, though. You've brought your concerns to us. And the last thing I *ever* want to be... is the adult I always feared when I was your age. So hear me now. I believe what you saw in New Amsterdam. In fact, I believe it so firmly that I have been seriously hard pressed to know whether to punish you for going there in the first place, or to commend you for your perfect dumb luck in escaping those rogue beasts. If Krum and the Harriers had not been there..." he shook his head and glared at them. "Well, suffice it to say I have told your mothers a rather edited version of the story, saving all of you the indignity of having Lanyard Charms tethering you to Hogwarts." To Ralph, he added, "Your father knows the whole thing, of course. He was with me when Viktor gave his briefing. If I had to guess, he was... both angry and proud at the same time. I can rather appreciate his response."

“The Collector isn’t just some deluded wizard making trouble in New Amsterdam, Dad,” James insisted in a low voice. “He was powerful.”

“And smart,” Rose added gravely. “He knew who James was.”

That caught Harry’s attention. He blinked at her. Finally, he nodded, and sighed. “I wish I could devote all of my resources to digging into it,” he admitted. “But we are spread terribly thin already. Still, we *will* look into it. I promise. Along with... everything else.” He shook his head.

Ralph accepted this stoically. “I guess that’s good enough for us, then. Right?”

Rose and James shrugged.

“So can we come to the meeting tomorrow night, Uncle Harry?” she asked, smiling sweetly. “Please?”

“No.” Harry smiled. “But I’ll tell you what I will do. I’ll post Kreacher outside the attic door to make sure you are all safe from any attempts to sneak down and eavesdrop. How’s that?”

James rolled his eyes. “You really are a bit of a killjoy, dad.”

“That’s what dads are for, son,” Harry stood and brushed off his knee. “Now if I am not mistaken, I believe I hear your Aunt and Teddy Lupin returning with the Christmas tree. Come. That tree won’t decorate itself.”

“Actually,” Ralph said thoughtfully as Harry led them down the stairs, “With Kreacher around, it very well might.”



Christmas morning turned out to be a singularly raucous and crowded occasion, what with so many people crammed into the narrow house and so many sweets being eaten, so many presents being unwrapped, and so many new sweaters, toys and games being tried on, tried out, and played with. Voices rang from the walls in a cacophony of

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genial argument as Rose, Albus and Louis played a new wizarding board game called Hex the Hag, wherein a tiny clockwork hag ran around the game board stealing cauldrons. This got rather out of hand when the tiny Hag escaped the board, darted under a nearby sofa, and was promptly pounced upon by Aunt Hermione's old ginger cat, Crookshanks, who ran off with the screaming clockwork imp. Nearby, James saw his Aunt Fleur trying on a pair of elbow-length red gloves, happily modelling them on her slender hands while Victoire sulked jealously, already bored with her own new boots and magical dancing locket.

James received a new sweater from his Grandmother, as had virtually every other member of the household, each one different and unique to the wearer, and each one, of course, hand-knitted and marvellously warm, even if they were not what Victoire called "fashion forward". Most members of the family donned theirs and wore them throughout the day, even as they crowded into the dining room for Christmas dinner.

"Help me out with this, would you Ron?" Harry announced as James, Ralph, Albus and Rose elbowed toward the heavy table, which was already laden with steaming bowls, platters and tureens. "I can never keep the corners plumb with a room this size. Too much raw space."

"No problem, mate," Ron nodded, raising his wand toward the far corner of the room, aiming over the enormous, roaring hearth. "On three, then?"

Harry nodded, and then glanced down at the children, nodding for them to step back. James retreated half a step, pushing Ralph and Rose behind him. Everyone watched as the two men firmed their grips on their wands and counted off.

"One..." Ron began.

"Two..." Harry added.

"Three!" both said in unison. The upraised wands fired simultaneously, producing beams of soft, nearly invisible orange light. The floor shuddered beneath James' feet as the far wall began to move, taking the burning fireplace and gaily decorated mantel with it. The walls creaked on either side as they elongated, slowly turning the high dining room into a long hall. The single frosted window stretched, its glass rippling like water, and then, with a gentle pop, divided into two windows. There was a long creak as the room nearly doubled in length. Along with it, the table stretched, sprouting matching new chairs like

mahogany popcorn. The house groaned deeply, wearily, and then there came the unmistakable sound of a muffled scream.

Ron and Harry extinguished their wands immediately.

“Who was that?” Ron asked quickly, wide eyed.

“It came from behind the wall,” Rose volunteered, pointing toward the end of the room.

“You incompetent clods!” a woman’s voice cried furiously, muffled behind the fireplace. James glanced at his father. It was Aunt Hermione. There was a thump, a clatter, and a series of rather unladylike curses. “You engorged the dining room right into the downstairs bath!”

A look of pure mortification fell over Uncle Ron’s face. He lowered his wand instantly and bobbed up on his tiptoes. Trying to keep the panic out of his voice, he called, “Are you all right, love?”

“I’m stuck!” she shouted back furiously. “In the *bathtub!*”

“Under the circumstances,” Harry nodded firmly, “I think you’d better be the one to go and charm her a new door, Ron. The back hallway should do nicely.”

Ron’s face was pale as he nodded. “Coming, love!” he called tremulously.

“And Ron,” Harry added, stopping Ron as he reached the door. “You should probably take a robe.”

Ron’s eyes widened again. He nodded vigorously and left, muttering nervously.

Fifteen minutes later, the newly engorged dining room table was surrounded by a happy throng of eating and drinking people, many of whom James was rather surprised to see. Seated on either side of Neville Longbottom were Professors Flitwick and McGonagall, both dressed in far more casual clothing than any of the students were accustomed to seeing them in (although McGonagall’s green and red tartan vest and huge, puffed sleeves were by far the most disconcerting of the lot). Further down, speaking loudly and intently across the table with his huge forearms crossed over his plate, was Professor Kendrick Debellows, his crew-cut bristling in the firelight and his voice booming from the walls. And dominating the end of the table with his enormous, bearded bulk was Hagrid, his holiday tankard of butterbeer nearly as large as a barrel and decorated with a massive, scrolled pewter handle.

“When did all these people get here?” Rose asked James as she peered around the table.

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“Trickled in one by one over the course of the afternoon,” Louis answered knowledgeably, reaching for another roll. “Most came via the cellar floo but a few, like Flitwick and that Auror bloke, Apparated just before dinner. Had their own family holidays to attend first, I heard Uncle George say.”

James shook his head, wondering. “Why are they all here, then?”

“It’s obvious, innit?” Louis replied, shooting up his eyebrows. “It’s the old Order, all coming together again!”

Albus scoffed. “That’s ridiculous. Grimmauld Place isn’t even all that secure anymore. Not like it used to be, back when dad was a kid. Besides, the Order of the Phoenix was about defeating Voldemort. Unless I’ve been missing some major news, I’m pretty sure he’s still dead.”

“The Order was about the safety of the magical world,” Rose countered softly, looking over the length of the table. “And as much as I hate to say it, Louis is right. A lot of these people are original members. We joked about it before, but perhaps it’s true. The Order of the Phoenix might be reconvened.”

Albus shook his head. “Why? Because some nutter headmaster gave Filch a magical cane?”

James felt a rising sense of apprehension, despite the raucously festive atmosphere. “There’s way more going on in the world than we know at Hogwarts. Grudje may be part of it... but he’s not all of it.”

“Then why isn’t Titus Hardcastle here?” Albus asked, rising in his seat and craning around the table. “There’s a few other blokes from the Auror department, but no Titus. Seems like an odd one to leave out, doesn’t it?”

James shrugged. “Maybe he’s coming later.”

“Maybe,” Ralph nodded. “I heard my dad say to Ron Weasley that he spoke to somebody at Alma Aleron on the Shard and they’ll be showing up later tonight.”

“Alma Aleron?” Rose whispered shrilly. “You mean, they’ll just be popping up as apparitions or something, using some of Chancellor Franklyn’s experimental communications techniques, right?”

Ralph shook his head doubtfully. “I don’t think so. I think they’re going to be here in person. Whatever it’s about, I don’t think they want any chance of being overheard or spied on.”

“Who’s coming?” Louis asked, leaning over the table. “You can tell us!”

Ralph shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't hear any names."

"Well that settles it," Albus said firmly. "We need to get into that meeting somehow."

Louis threw up his hands. "Not a chance. You know we've been banished to the attic once the sun goes down tonight. Kreacher will be standing guard, too. He's as stubborn as a wart on a hag's nose. Nobody can get past him."

"Well, *you* couldn't, that's for sure." Albus admitted.

"Shut up, all of you," Rose hissed. "If they catch wind that we're even talking about this, they'll do worse than have Kreacher stand guard!"

James nodded agreement. At that moment, Grandma Weasley and Aunt Fleur appeared with double armloads of fresh puddings, some half as tall as the women and bedecked with red and green gumdrops. Suddenly, however, the last thing James wanted was a plate full of sweets.

For the first time in his life, in fact, he was impatient for Christmas dinner to be over.



Ralph and Louis half-heartedly played Hex the Hag on the attic floor, taking turns hexing the tiny clockwork figure so that it ran back and forth across the game board, knocking tiny cauldrons aside. From beneath a nearby bunk, Crookshanks' huge green eyes glowed like lamps, watching the figure greedily. Beyond the stacks of bunks, Kreacher's voice could be heard muttering incessantly just outside the locked attic door.

"We could levitate one of us out the window," James suggested with a shrug.

"Don't be an idiot," Rose grumped, her chin resting on her hands and her feet kicking idly over the side of a top bunk.

Behind her, in the darkness of the attic's depths, Albus clambered noisily, moving crates and ferreting through trunks.

"What's he doing back there?" Lily asked, peering through the shadows. "And why's he in such a good mood, us all being stuck in the attic while big exciting things are being discussed downstairs?"

"I heard Professor Jackson is here from Alma Aleron!" Louis spoke up suddenly. "I would love to meet him. He wrote the book on Technomancy."

"Literally," Ralph nodded.

"Maybe one of us could Apparate!" James proposed, brightening for a moment. "That's possible here these days, isn't it? We could just pop down one floor! Kreacher would be none the wiser!"

"Have you ever *seen* someone get splinched?" Rose asked archly.

James glowered at her. "No."

"I once saw a fifth year end up halfway through a desk, upside down."

James firmed his jaw. "Well. That doesn't... er... sound so..."

"His head was in the bottom drawer." She added.

“Look, I don’t hear you coming up with any amazing ideas!” James proclaimed, waving a hand at his cousin.

Across the room, Victoire, lounging languidly on a middle bunk, lowered her book.

“All of you, give it up. It’s none of our business anyway. Why you waste so much energy on such pointless things is truly beyond me.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Says the girl who subscribes to *Fashion Enchantment Weekly*.”

“Look at me!” a voice laughed suddenly. “I’m old Mrs. Black!”

James wheeled around on his bunk to see Albus standing near the attic window resplendent in a monstrous purple dress, his head nearly buried under a hat the size of a lorry tire. A ghastly stuffed owl leaned precariously from the hat, its topaz eyes flashing. “There’s a whole wardrobe of this stuff back here. Jewellery, too! Look!” He thrust out his wrist, showing a collection of silver bracelets, charms and jewelled bands that would have made Professor Trelawney green with envy.

“Albus, you berk,” Rose said sternly, but James heard a laugh stifled beneath her words.

“My name is Walburga Black!” Albus proclaimed in a high falsetto, framing his face with his hands. “How dare you desecrate the house of my fathers, you horrible Muggle-rubbing cauldron tossers! Sod off with the lot of you or I’ll hex you as ugly as myself!”

“Albus Severus Potter,” Lily giggled helplessly. “Put those things back! Seriously, you’ll get us all into trouble.”

“Oh, you don’t know what trouble is, dearie!” Albus shrieked, grabbing a fringed, jewel-handled umbrella and brandishing it like a sword. “You watered-down halfblood huggers will feel the sting of my curse! How dare you set foot in my father’s house! I’ll wear even more hideous clothes at you, see if I don’t!” He spun on the spot and jammed his feet into a pair of high-heeled green leather boots. “Now come over here so I don’t have to walk in these!”

A rush of cold air swept through the room as the attic door suddenly wrenched open. Everyone turned to see Kreacher looming in the doorway, his knobby shoulders hunched, his face pulled down in a frown so pronounced that it seemed nearly to reach the floor.

“Found my mistress’ things, they did,” he growled emphatically, his deep bullfrog voice vibrating through the floorboards. “Making a

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mockery of my dearly departed mistress, and no mistake. Show no respect, they don't."

And then, with no fanfare whatsoever, Kreacher vanished.

"Augh!" Albus screamed. "What the...! Get off me!"

James wheeled around again. Kreacher had reappeared directly behind Albus, his face etched with such refined rage that it appeared to be carved in granite. Swiftly, he pointed his bony fingers at Albus, stinging him with hexes so that Albus began to involuntarily disrobe, jerkily and spasmodically.

"Agh!" Albus gasped. "All right! Stop it! ARGH! OW! Sod off, you miserable little OUCH!"

Kreacher paused as Albus kicked off the boots desperately, falling to his bum on the dusty wooden floor. The house elf caught the boots deftly, still glaring unblinking at Albus, his mouth pressed into a tight line of fury.

"They should not touch Mistress' things," he growled in his gravelly voice. "Once a Mistress, always a Mistress. And Mistress strictly instructed that no one was ever to meddle with her boudoir. Not even any new 'Masters'."

"I wasn't *meddling*," Albus protested, rubbing his arms where Kreacher had stung him. "I was rooting about! Just having some fun. What do you expect, us being all locked up here in the attic all night!"

"Shows no respect," Kreacher muttered again, making a summoning gesture into the shadows. In response, the open trunks snapped shut and lurched forward, rocking back and forth noisily on their corners. "Must find a new home for my Mistress' things so long as the new 'Master' is about, him never having learnt any manners. A shameful thing it is. Oh, how my Mistress could have taught him. Bore no such insolence, did she. Knew how to train children. Knew when a wand was more effective than a word."

As he muttered, Kreacher crossed between the bunks, leading a clunky procession of trunks, hat-racks, and one very narrow, gilded wardrobe, its ancient mirrors clouded nearly black and smeared with dust. One by one, the items marched through the doorway and into the hall as Kreacher watched. Finally, with a malevolent, beady glance back at Albus, he followed. The door slammed shut behind him, shaking the walls and raining grit from the rafters. Dimly, the clunking procession faded toward the other end of the house.

“And *that*,” Albus announced, jumping up and swatting dust from his behind, “is how you get rid of Kreacher. So, who’s coming?”

Lily blinked owlshly at her brother. “You mean to tell us that... you *planned* that?”

“While you lot were wasting your breath trying to figure out how to out-magic the old imp,” Albus nodded. “I remembered what Professor Debellows taught us.” Here, he lowered his voice and threw out his chest. “Don’t exploit your enemy’s weakness, for he may have none. Exploit his passion and the battle is yours.”

“Wow,” James said approvingly, jumping down from his bunk. “You really took one for the team. I was sure that Kreacher was going to straight up murder you there for a second.”

“I admit I may have overdone it a bit,” Albus acknowledged, rubbing his arms again. “But when duty calls...”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Louis piped up. “And you lot are daft if you do. After that affair, if Kreacher does catch you out, he totally *will* kill you.”

“Nonsense,” Lily said. “Kreacher’s our house elf. He wouldn’t hurt any of us.”

“Kreacher came with Grimmauld Place,” Victoire corrected, sitting up on her bunk. “He’s the *house’s* house elf. He just obeys you lot because obedience is a hard thing for house elves to shake. Louis is right. You’re nutters to sneak out. If you do, we’ll both turn you in.”

“You do,” Rose said firmly, approaching the door, “And I’ll tell Teddy Lupin how you *really* spent that month when you and he broke up ‘for the good of the relationship’.”

Victoire’s face darkened dangerously. “You little munter. You wouldn’t.”

Rose put on an elaborate French accent and clasped both hands next to her cheek. “Oh, Nolan Beetlebrick! How *beeg* and *strong* you are! And so good at Quidditch! I know eet is wrong, but there is somezing about Slytherin men that ees just so... *naughty!*”

“I don’t talk like that!” Victoire seethed loudly. “And it was just a weekend! Not all month!”

“Come on,” Rose said, pointing her wand at the door. “Kreacher will be back any moment. *Alohamora!*”

There was a golden flash and the lock snicked. Albus grabbed the handle and wrenched the door open. The hall beyond was dark and

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empty, leading to a narrow stairwell. James stopped in the doorway and glanced back. "Lil, you stay here, and I don't want to hear a word. If we get caught sneaking out, we'll just get in trouble. If we get caught letting *you* out, mum will destroy us."

"You aren't *letting* me out!" Lily protested. "I'm not a pet gerbil! I can go if I wish!"

"James is right, Lily," Rose admonished gently. "We'll tell you everything we hear when we get back, promise."

"I never get to do anything fun." Lily groused, folding her arms dramatically.

James turned to Ralph. "You coming, Ralphinator?"

Ralph shook his head, his cheeks pale. "Not this time. That elf of yours scares the hair off me. I think I'll just sit this one out."

"Suit yourself," Albus agreed cheerily, sweeping past James into the hall. "Let's get gone. We're missing all the good stuff downstairs."

James followed his brother out into the dark hall, closing the door behind him. It locked automatically, and James stopped as a thought occurred to him.

"Hold on a mo'. If Kreacher comes back while we're gone, how are we going to get back inside?"

He turned toward Rose and Albus, both of whom were standing on the top step of the staircase. They glanced at each other. Albus shrugged.

"I only worked out how to sneak out," he admitted. "Getting back in never even crossed my mind."

"You stupid git!" James hissed. "It's no good at all if we get caught coming *back!* Rose, get back here with your wand and unlock this thing. I forgot mine!" He stepped away from the door and pointed at it.

Rose frowned dourly but seemed to recognize the sense in James' objection. She took one step back toward the locked door, wand in hand, when a small pop sounded in the darkness of the hall. Kreacher reappeared, his back to them, staring hard at the door as if he knew something was afoot. Slowly, he turned and looked back over his shoulder, his huge eyes sparkling in the gloom.

Without thinking, James bolted. He ran toward the stairs and was joined there by Rose and Albus. Banging shoulders and bouncing off the walls, the three scrambled to the third floor, nearly toppling into a heap on the rug below.

“There!” Albus gasped, pointing. “Split up! One a room!”

“You’re insane!” Rose objected shrilly, even as Albus lunged forward, throwing himself through an open bedroom door and ramming it shut.

“I’ll take my mum and dad’s room!” she panted, darting forward. “You take the bathroom!”

“But the lock’s broken!” James objected.

Rose, however, did not glance back. She pelted into the second bedroom and closed the door as quickly and quietly as she could. A moment later the deadbolt clacked into place. James shook his head in frustration and dove toward the dark bathroom. His feet echoed on the old tile floor as he spun around and pushed the door closed. It refused to latch, much less lock. James grabbed the rickety chair next to the sink and rammed it under the door handle, wedging it in place. He leaned against the door, then slid down to the floor and pressed an eye to the crack at the bottom.

From this vantage, he could see the length of the hall rug stretching away toward the stairs. Slowly, silently, a pair of naked grey feet padded down into view, and then stopped. James could hear Kreacher’s voice muttering quietly but clearly in the confines of the hall.

“Think they can outsmart old Kreacher, they do,” he seethed to himself. “But Kreacher has ways they know nothing of. Kreacher has means beyond any young witch or wizard.”

James couldn’t see above Kreacher’s bony ankles, but he watched the house elf’s shadow where it fell along a nearby wall. The shadow snapped its fingers and a small square object appeared in mid-air, dropping into the shadow’s open hand. The other hand unfurled its long fingers and pinched the small object, opening it like a jewellery box. Kreacher’s shadow tipped the box over.

Two dark objects fell silently to the hall floor in front of Kreacher’s feet. From James’ perspective, the objects appeared to be black marbles, glossy as Raven’s eyes in the darkness. Then, the objects began to flatten and spread, like beads of oil soaking into the nappy carpet. The drops grew, expanding and sending out long, glistening tendrils. Then, shapes began to bulge up out of the black goo. The shapes became hard, angular, transforming into jointed appendages, struggling swiftly out of the sticky black. Finally, both shapes leapt fully out of themselves,

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transforming into two miniature versions of Kreacher, each no more than six inches high, and each as black and liquid as ink.

“Three escaped charges,” Kreacher croaked with satisfaction. “And three of Kreacher. Only fair, isn’t it?”

With that, the three shapes began to pad along the hallway, making no noise at all on the threadbare carpet. They split up, each approaching one door. Kreacher stepped toward the bedroom that Rose had hidden inside. One of the Ink Kreachers stalked purposefully toward the bathroom door beyond which James crouched. Then, suddenly, it paused. It seemed to spy James’ eye peering from beneath the door. It bent over slightly, almost playfully, as if to get a better look. Then, it straightened, raised one hand into a fist, and extended its index finger toward the ceiling. The finger wagged back and forth in a shaming gesture.

The Ink Kreacher could, James realized, slither right beneath the bathroom door if it wanted.

He clambered upright as the thought fully struck him. He cast around the dark room desperately. Suddenly, being caught by the horrible Ink Kreacher seemed the very last thing on earth he wanted. The bathroom provided no hiding place, however. The ancient claw-foot tub was huge and rust-stained, its curtain rod long barren of any curtain. The pedestal sink glowed ivory in the dimness.

A shadow moved in the bar of light beneath the door. A subtle liquid squelching sound reached James’ ears as the Kreacher began to slither through. James backed away and bumped against the tile wall between the sink and the tub. His hand knocked against a wooden object, producing a hollow clunk. He glanced aside. A small door was set into the wall, latched with a tiny doorknob. Beyond that door, James knew, was the laundry chute, a dark shaft that led down between the walls, through three floors and into the cellar. Was it possible? Was it, in fact, any safer?

The Ink Kreacher squelched into the darkness of the bathroom, one arm waving blackly as the rest of its body squeezed through. Horribly, James heard a high, muttering voice emanating from it. The words were indecipherable, but the tone was the same monotonous ramble Kreacher always seemed to employ under his breath. It squeaked and prattled to itself as it poured into the room like black syrup.

James yanked the laundry chute door open, gave the darkness beyond a cursory examination, and then climbed up onto the edge of the tub. He had just rammed his right foot into the chute when the Ink Kreachter finally popped fully from beneath the door. It stood erect and regarded him with its ebony eyes. It was like being stared down by a particularly hideous, bipedal spider.

James slid his other foot into the darkness of the chute, gripped its upper ledge with both hands, and began to shimmy swiftly through the narrow opening. The Ink Kreachter leapt after him, but the door swung shut behind James, causing the tiny imp to bounce off it with a wet *splat*.

James fell into seamless, whooshing dark, only now fully realizing that he had just thrown himself off a very narrow, forty foot ledge. He jammed out his knees and elbows, desperately trying to arrest his fall. With a juddering screech, he caught himself after a few dozen feet. A narrow ledge snagged his heels, which popped through into some unknown space. His entire body followed, jouncing painfully through the opening into the very cold, very hard embrace of some cocoon-like shape. He banged his head against it and heard the slam of another small wooden door behind him.

“Ow!” he rasped to himself, rubbing his head with both hands. He glanced around and at first saw only blank whiteness. Finally, he realized that he had kicked his way inadvertently through the lower laundry chute door, ending up in the first floor bathroom. The tub had caught him, which was fortunate, because the rest of the room was a cramped shambles, almost unrecognizable in its current state. Of course it was. This was the bathroom that had given up most of its space to the engorged dining room immediate next to it. As a result, the sink was crammed right up next to the tub, leaning over it like a vulture. The toilet was hunched in the narrow closet, whose door jutted open like a broken wing. There was no longer any exit, the main door being buried behind the accordioned walls, thus explaining aunt Hermione’s earlier discomfiture.

For now, James was glad there was no door. It meant there was no easy way for Kreachter, or even his horrible ink doppelgangers, to get in and catch him.

And then, beyond the wall on James’ left, he heard the dim echo of voices.

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“I’m sure it was nothing,” a man’s voice announced-- was it his father? “We had to enlarge the dining room rather a lot to accommodate us all. The house is likely settling a bit. Do carry on, Draco.”

“As I was saying,” another man’s voice said with a note of impatience, “Ms. Morganstern may indeed be a formidable witch, but her sense of stealth is surprisingly lacking.” James frowned where he lay in the bathtub, concentrating on the muffled voice. Was that Draco Malfoy, his dad’s old school nemesis, and the father of Scorpius? He recognized the man’s lazy, indifferent drawl from two years ago, at Granddad’s funeral, when Draco and his wife had come to pay their rather cool respects.

“Stealth stems from a sense of danger,” a woman’s voice, Professor McGonagall, spoke up. “It may be that Ms. Morganstern feels no such apprehension. She may not conceal her movements simply because she does not fear capture. Her power, whatever its source, may give her an illusion of invulnerability.”

“After what happened last summer,” Uncle George’s voice commented darkly, “I’m not sure it’s an illusion.”

Kendrick Debellows harrumphed. “She’s powerful, no question. But everyone is vulnerable. She was captured once, after all, and by those layabouts in the American Wizarding Administration. She can be captured again.”

“Those ‘layabouts’, as you call them, are among the finest professional law keepers in the world.” The speaker was Alma Aleron’s Professor Jackson, whom James recognized by his steely tone and his American accent. “And it took seven of them simultaneously to subdue her. Not to mention that they had the advantage of surprise. Ms. Morganstern will not be surprised again, I would wager. Before last summer, she was merely a mysteriously gifted young witch. Now, she is the world’s most wanted magical fugitive, single-handedly responsible not only for the revelation of the magical world, but for the theft of a priceless and powerful artefact, the crimson thread from the Vault of Destinies. Its continued absence has untold, and frankly unknowable, effects on our world, increasing every moment of every day.”

James sat up in the bathtub and stared unseeingly into the darkness, straining his ears. This was the last thing he’d expected his father and the rest of the adults to be discussing. Was Petra really Undesirable Number One, the most wanted criminal in the entire magical world? And was the missing Crimson Thread, lost in the World Between

the Worlds, truly altering the destiny of the world every day? He recalled the words of Headmaster Merlin from last year, as they had all stood gazing at the stopped magical loom, its enigmatic weaving of destiny halted by the missing thread: *this changes everything*. It was more than James could begin to comprehend. A sense of deepening dismay and worry fanned out in his veins as the conversation continued.

“Coming to the point,” James heard his father say calmly. “Does this mean, Draco, that you have been able to trace some of Petra’s movements?”

“Marginally,” Draco admitted. “The difficulty is not in following her via her transactions. It is in doing so without getting caught by my superiors. Gringotts goblins are notoriously neutral in the legal affairs of the wizarding world, but their sense of professional propriety is a law of its own. If they discovered I was using bank records to track a fugitive, getting sacked would be the least of my worries.”

“We all appreciate the risk you are taking,” Professor Flitwick assured in his tiny voice. “But your information is the best we have. It’s a pity that the Ministry rejects it.”

“They don’t just reject it,” Harry lamented. “They deem it patently illegal. And perhaps they are right to. Gringotts’ coin tracking enchantments are powerful goblin magic, capable of dangerous exploitation in the wrong hands. Fortunately, goblins are as above ill-gotten gain as they are civic conscience.”

“Well, I think that may be a bit harsh,” McGonagall tutted.

Harry sighed. “You’re probably right. Apologies for your co-workers, Draco.”

“No apologies necessary,” Draco said lightly. “They would agree with you. They believe such things as civic duty, morality and social conscience are plain hindrances to proper banking. They go out of their way to avoid such sentiments.”

Professor Longbottom asked tiredly, “What have you discovered, Draco?”

“Not a lot, but what I do know is quite curious,” Draco said, clearly enjoying being the centre of attention. “She is traveling extensively, visiting all manner of establishments. She does not stay long, and she buys very little. What money does change hands does so almost exclusively under the guise of tips.”

“Tips for what?” Angelina asked. “If she isn’t buying anything?”

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“Tips for information,” Harry answered, almost to himself. “She is looking for something. Or someone.”

“Any ideas what?” Aunt Hermione asked, her voice serious. “What would she be seeking that was so important she had to travel the world to find it?”

There was a murmur of conjecture, but no one seemed to have any meaningful answer. Draco raised his voice and went on.

“Even more important, perhaps, is this: Ms. Morganstern is not alone.”

Hermione gasped. “You mean she’s traveling with her half-sister, Isabella?”

“Well yes, much of the time, as evidenced by the few things she does purchase, including occasional meals and, strangely, dolls. Her young sister, apparently, has rather a thing for China dolls. But it seems she has a male traveling companion as well. His own transactions have occurred regularly enough at the exact same time and places to firmly establish that they are together virtually constantly.”

“Who?” Angelina asked, a bit breathlessly.

“His name is Marshall Parris,” Draco replied, accompanied by the shuffling of turning pages as he apparently consulted his notes. “Formerly of New Amsterdam. A Muggle, but one with a history of interactions with the magical world. He performs services as a hired investigator, and his list of former clients includes a surprising number of American wizards and witches, some of them quite prominent.”

“I’ve heard of him,” Professor Jackson said disdainfully. “Calls himself an expert in the ‘trans-mundane’. Pure nonsense. Causes more trouble than good with the Magical Integration Bureau. In fact, if I am not mistaken, they have attempted to shut him down on more than one occasion.”

“Why in the world,” McGonagall queried sceptically, “would any witch or wizard hire a Muggle for investigative purposes?”

Jackson scoffed. “No one knows, and no one asks. And yet, somehow, he seems to get results. He has made enemies of some of the darkest and most notorious wizarding families in New Amsterdam. One would think he should be cursed dead a hundred times over. And yet, he persists, just one more of New Amsterdam’s countless, apparently immortal cockroaches. Whatever enchantment or talisman he uses to

protect himself, it must be singularly powerful and unique. Either that, or he is simply the luckiest damned man to ever walk the earth.”

In the cramped dimness of the bathroom, James frowned to himself. *Marshall Parris*. He'd seen that name before. It took him a moment to remember, and then it struck him. It had been scribbled in Petra's handwriting on the parchment of her dream story. It was probably still there, hidden away in its sealed packet in his trunk on the top floor. He reminded himself to check it again later that night. If, that was, he ever got out of the door-less bathroom.

“So whatever Ms. Morganstern is seeking,” Professor Longbottom mused, “she feels she cannot find it on her own. She has enlisted the help of a Muggle who is especially gifted, somehow, with finding magical things.”

“And making enemies in the wizarding world,” Uncle Ron added gruffly. “With this, he sure has outdone himself. If he's helping Petra Morganstern, he's making enemies of every witch and wizard on the planet.”

Harry didn't respond to this. Instead, he asked Draco, “Any ideas where she and this Marshall Parris bloke may be going next?”

James could almost hear Draco shake his head as he sighed. “There is literally no rhyme or reason to their movements. They travel hundreds of miles in a matter of minutes, then seem to fall off the map for days and weeks on end. One may as well throw a dart at a map and come up with as good a guess as mine.”

There was a long pause. Then, Harry asked, “Any sightings of them in New Amsterdam since the Night of the Unveiling?”

“Well, that is the question, isn't it?” Draco replied. “As far as Gringotts is concerned, New Amsterdam has gone completely dark. All business is closed. If money is changing hands there, it is doing so completely anonymously. It won't show up again until it re-enters the market outside of the quarantine zone. And at that point, the trail would be too cold to matter.”

There was another murmur of agitated conversation. After half a minute, Draco spoke up once again, and this time his voice reminded James of Draco's dead father, the venomous Lucius Malfoy. “I do have a question for you as well, Harry,” he drawled. “And I hope you won't mind my asking. I suspect you can understand the nature of my concern.”

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“Go on,” Harry said. “You’ve been very helpful. Ask away.”

“Well then,” Draco said, lowering his voice. “I cannot help wondering. If the Ministry of Magic has deemed evidence gained from Gringotts’ transaction tracking illegal and inadmissible, what do you, as a representative of the Department of Aurors, a Ministry entity, hope to accomplish with this information?”

Hagrid answered this, speaking for the first time. “That’s not exactly any o’ our business now, is it?” he said brusquely, his voice rumbling through the bathroom wall. “‘Arry here is more’n an Auror. We all know that. It’s not our place to go questioning ‘is methods.”

“It’s all right, Hagrid,” Harry soothed. “Draco is right to ask. After all, he’s placed himself at great risk. He deserves to know his efforts haven’t been for nothing. The fact of the matter is, as some of you know, I am not in charge of the search for Petra. Officially speaking, I’ve been placed on strictly administrative and diplomatic duties. Titus Hardcastle is in charge of the street operations and raids.”

“Whut?” Hagrid proclaimed in disbelief. “Whatever for, then? You’re the best Auror ‘at’s ever been! Everyone knows that!”

To James’ surprise, it was Uncle Ron that spoke up. “The Ministry, and by that I mean Loquacious Knapp and his new best mate, Rechter Grudje, have decided that Harry’s loyalties in this matter are compromised. Harry and his family housed Petra, after all, on two occasions, both times after she had been accused, and in one instance later convicted, of serious crimes.”

“Wellnow,” Hagrid objected, raising his voice. “I don’ believe I like the tone o’ that. If ‘Arry puts someone up in ‘is ‘ouse, it’d be for a damn good reason. You can’t blame ‘im for ‘avin’ a heart! E’s still a professional!”

“We all understand that and agree with you, Hagrid,” Hermione interjected. “But the Minister can’t be budged on the matter. He feels that Harry, and many of the rest of us, cannot be relied on to do our jobs objectively, without letting our personal feelings get in the way.”

“And what do you say to that, Harry?” Draco asked, all aloof courtesy gone completely from his voice. “Can you do your duty objectively? Can you do what it takes, officially or otherwise, for I assume that is why we are all here, meeting in secret-- to apprehend Petra Morganstern and stop her from causing any more irreparable damage to

both the wizarding and Muggle worlds? Can you, in fact, perform this duty without letting your feelings get in the way?"

There was a long, heavy pause, one that not even Hagrid (who was surely seething with barely restrained anger at Draco's temerity) interrupted.

And then, as if in answer, a heavy concussion shook the entire house. The noise and juddering vibration of it surprised James so much that he nearly leapt out of the dark bathtub. The mirror over the sink popped loose and shattered in the basin, raining James with silvery shards.

"What in heaven...!" Professor McGonagall's voice shrilled suddenly from beyond the wall.

A chair clattered against the wall as several people in the next room seemed to leap to their feet. "That, I daresay," Kendrick Debellows growled, "was *not* the house settling."

James' first thought was that Kreacher was using some especially powerful elfish magic to capture him, Rose and Albus. Almost immediately, however, he knew that was ridiculous. Elf magic was exceedingly powerful, but being borne of servitude, it was always subtle. Whatever had shaken the house, it had most certainly not been subtle.

"The *Repello Inimicum* charm," Ron Weasley proclaimed in a hushed voice. "Something hit it. And hard!"

Voices echoed gruffly, this time from behind James. There was the familiar whooshing *CRACK* of apparition, followed by thumping footsteps. James patted his pockets for his wand, and then remembered that he had foolishly left it in the attic dormitory. If he was going to get out of the truncated bathroom and see what was happening, it was going to happen only when someone else let him out.

He wasn't sure if he was more disappointed or relieved by that fact.

Two sets of running footsteps converged in the hall behind James. Through the wall, he heard a hoarse voice growl, "There's a large congregation in the room five paces beyond that wall-- the dining room, if I recall. Guard the perimeter and don't let any pass, either by magic or hidden passage, for this house is lousy with secrets. We'll flank from the main entrance on the other side."

The speaker thumped away quickly, apparently leaving his companion. James barely had a moment to register the words when the wall behind him produced a frightful shudder, showering the bathtub

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with plaster dust. When he looked up, a huge oak door had appeared in the wall, its brass knob glinting over the ledge of the tub. The knob turned and the door swept silently open, revealing a dark figure, its wand extended in one gloved hand.

“What the...?” the dark figure exclaimed huskily, taking a step backward from the bathtub which blocked the door and the fifteen year old boy lying inside it. James was surprised to realize the figure was a woman. She recovered from her surprise almost instantly and levelled her wand at him.

James reacted purely by instinct. He grabbed the witch’s wand hand by the wrist and used it to heave himself out of the tub toward her. She cursed angrily, still keeping her voice professionally hushed, and pivoted, hurling James through the door and against the wall behind her, dislodging a large portrait of a grim-faced Black patriarch. The portrait fell atop James, which was fortunate, for it deflected the red bolt that leapt from the witch’s wand. The bolt burst into sparks, awakening the portrait with a start.

“What’s all this then?” it demanded stridently.

James clambered to his feet and shoved the portrait upwards with him, using it like a shield against the intruder. She cursed again, losing her composure, and stumbled backwards through the door she had conjured. The tub connected with the back of her knees and she collapsed noisily into the dark of the bathroom, rapping her head sharply on the edge of the tub as it caught her. This time her exclamation of anger was neither hushed nor professional. She clambered wildly, her legs flailing as she began to thrash her way out of the bathtub.

James threw the portrait at her. It knocked against her knees and fell atop her, covering the tub like a gilded lid.

“This is an outrage!” the portrait cried in a muffled voice.

“*Shut up!*” the woman hissed. Suddenly, James realized that her voice was vaguely familiar. He took no time to consider this, however, instead darting along the narrow hall toward the main staircase. Another dark figure appeared there, apparating directly onto the stairs with a swoosh and a crack. Like the woman, the figure was dressed head to toe in black, its face hidden beneath a heavy cowl. Its wand was already out. In an instant, the wand pointed toward James.

“Stop him!” the woman cried from behind, clattering out from beneath the portrait.

James ducked under a narrow table just as a bolt of red lit the air. The Stunning spell struck the small table, knocking it aside. James ran, his feet pounding wildly and slipping on the hallway rug. More bolts sizzled over his head.

He scrambled around a corner and ran into something so large and firm that he bounced off it, rebounding to the hall floor on his bum. The something leaned over him and extended a monstrous slab of a hand. James slapped at the hand before he realized who it belong to.

“Behind me!” Hagrid boomed. “*Now!*”

James felt himself lifted from the floor and swept behind the half giant, whose hulking form seemed to fill the entire corridor. Amazingly, red bursts exploded against Hagrid’s shoulder and chest, forcing him to stumble backwards, but not, as one would expect, knocking him to the floor like a felled tree.

“Who are you!” a voice nearby demanded. James dimly realized that it was his father. “Cease fire and identify yourselves!”

Amazingly, the spells stopped. The smell of spent magic, faint but acrid, hung in the air. James glanced up and saw his father, Neville Longbottom, Uncle George, Professor Jackson, and Kendrick Debellows, all with their wands extended, crowded around the enormous slab of Hagrid’s shielding body. Hagrid swayed precipitously but kept his feet. James hunkered down and peered around the hem of Hagrid’s coat.

The figure on the stairs had been joined by three others, one of whom was the woman James had encountered outside the bathroom. All he could see of her face was a somewhat pointed chin and angrily pursed red lips. Wands projected from the intruders’ fists, held as firm as stone. Finally, the figure on the stairs, easily the tallest of the group, clumped down the stairs, lowering his wand. The others followed suit, if reluctantly. As the tall figure reached the main floor, he raised an arm and swept back his cowl, revealing a tangled bush of a beard, matted ginger hair, and eyes as beady and black as onyx.

“Titus,” Harry exhaled harshly. “What’s this all about?”

“We might ask you the same thing,” the woman demanded angrily, her wand still clenched in her fist. “You were supposed to be at the Burrow! That’s what you told all of us!”

“Hush Lucinda,” Titus growled. James’ eyes grew wide when he heard the name. Lucinda Lyon was one of his dad’s best Aurors. She had been to their house in Marble Arch on several occasions, both

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professionally and socially. She had always seemed very friendly and jocular, which was somewhat unusual for an Auror. James could hardly reconcile the affable, joking Lucinda he had known before to the cold, angry woman that stood before him now.

“We had a change of plans,” Harry answered sternly. “Last I checked that wasn’t against the law.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that anymore,” Titus sighed, tucking his wand into the recesses of his robe. Despite the disarming gesture, James noticed, Titus’ eyes never flinched from the congregation gathered before the dining room archway. “These are treacherous times, Harry. Caution is always wise. And large gatherings tend to arouse suspicion, especially in light of this evening’s events. You might have informed us.”

“What events?” Kendrick Debellows demanded, lowering his wand toward the floor. “Surely a gathering of friends on the night of the Christ Mass is no cause for Ministry alarm.”

“Not usually,” Titus answered. “But I was referring to other, more serious events. We attempted to inform you by floo, Harry, but of course found only an empty Burrow and no response. Same at Marble Arch. With that, I assembled a team to seek you in the last place we knew of, not knowing what we would find. Wariness seemed prudent.”

“Wariness!?” Hagrid boomed shakily, still swaying on his feet. “You blast into your mate’s home with wands a-blazing and call that wariness?”

“Hagrid,” Neville said quietly, “Why don’t you have a seat?”

Hagrid nodded and seemed to deflate slightly. “S’matter of fact, that suddenly seems like a very good idea.” With that, the half-giant’s knees unhinged and he folded to the floor with a thump that shook the entire house. James barely had time to scramble out of the way before Hagrid slumped backwards to the rug, unconscious, his arms and legs akimbo.

“How many Stuns did he absorb?” James heard his mum’s voice ask from the dining room archway.

“Can’t say,” Aunt Hermione replied under her breath. “But I imagine all that peppermint Dragonmeade he downed beforehand didn’t hurt.”

Harry stepped over the prone figure of Hagrid and approached his fellow Auror. “I agree that prudence was called for, Titus. But this seems more like a raid than a delivery of news.”

“When I tell you the news, you may forgive our concern. But you should know that none of us fired before we were attacked.”

“Who attacked you?” Professor McGonagall demanded shrilly, emerging from the dining room arch. “None of us, I can assure you!”

Titus ticked his head toward Lucinda, who flinched.

“He threw a painting at me!” she declared, throwing back her cowl and revealing her short blonde hair. She pointed at James, her cheeks reddening. “I didn’t recognize him in the dark, and the next thing I know, some dodgy old duffer was being rammed into my face.”

“I see,” Harry said stonily, glancing back at his son. “Well. No harm done, fortunately. But perhaps next time you won’t fire until you know exactly who you are firing at. I am quite sure that was one of the first things I taught you.”

Lucinda’s cheeks burned even brighter, but a look of defiance glinted in her green eyes.

Titus lowered his voice, addressing Harry directly, “There was an attack today, at the summit in Luxembourg. A rogue wizard somehow broke through the cordon. He was able to get off several killing curses before security caught up to him.”

“Hold on a moment,” Professor Flitwick queried, tripping slightly as he clambered over the sleeping form of Hagrid. “Today, you say? What summit would be occurring on Christmas day?”

Kendrick Debellows answered darkly, “A summit that no one else was to know about, I wager. No one expects governments to do anything on this day, therefore whatever they do can be done with no scrutiny whatsoever. Isn’t that correct, Harry?”

Harry nodded. “It was a classified meeting between Muggle and magical authorities about how to manage the secrecy of the magical world, a task that is increasingly difficult, and which many resent. Some Muggle leaders are opposed to keeping the secret, in fact, and are actively pushing for complete revelation. The summit included members of world wizarding administrations, attempting to shore up support and cooperation.”

“Why wasn’t I informed of this?” Percy demanded stridently, pushing toward the front of the group. “I should have been there!”

“You should be glad you were not,” Titus answered challengingly, raising his bearded chin. “Two members of the Department of Ambassadorial Relations were struck down, one fatally. The other,

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fortunately, was only grazed by a killing curse. And yet, it seems her left side is permanently paralyzed, and she has been rendered blind.”

“Dear me,” Professor McGonagall whispered, raising a hand to her throat.

Harry sighed in resignation. “Who else?”

“Only one other fatality,” Titus answered grimly. “But one that will result in dreadful repercussions. Whatever agreements have been struck with Muggle governments the world over, they are in jeopardy tonight. This rogue wizard, who somehow managed to get past twenty-five magical guards, succeeded in killing the vice president of the United States. A man named Joseph Mattigan.”

“Good God,” Harry breathed, placing a hand over his eyes. Without lowering it, he asked, “Has the murderer been apprehended?”

Titus shook his head slowly. “No need. Once he had succeeded in cursing the vice president, he raised his own wand to his head and proclaimed allegiance to the Wizard’s United Liberation Front. With that, he cursed himself. He was dead before he hit the floor.”

“Insane!” Neville Longbottom proclaimed wonderingly. “How could an insane person have broken through the security perimeter?”

“Not insane,” Harry replied in a low voice. “The W.U.L.F. are not given to suicide attacks. This was something else entirely.”

“You mean he was lying about his allegiance?” McGonagall asked in disbelief.

Harry did not answer, merely shook his head helplessly.

“A squad has been sent to the scene, for what it’s worth,” Titus said. “Along with a regimen of Harriers.”

“The Harriers should have been there from the beginning,” Debellow announced angrily. “And damn the Ministry for their lack of foresight. ‘Provocative presence’ nothing! If the Harriers served as guards at these sorts of events we would see a lot less bloodshed!”

Harry ignored Debellow’s outburst. To Titus, he asked, “What has been the American government’s response?”

“There is but one response,” a voice answered from behind James. He glanced back to see Professor Jackson standing ramrod straight in the arch, his face pale with fury. “The president will name a new Vice President of his choosing, as the law allows. A story will be concocted by the Drummond administration to explain the sudden death of Vice President Mattigan, leaving out any reference to his attendance at a

summit of magical entities. And in secret, any agreements signed between President Drummond and the American Magical Administration will be considered unofficially void. This bodes very poorly for the security of the Magical community in the United States.”

“Not to mention the world in general,” Harry agreed. “For better or worse, where America treads, many others will follow.” He turned back to Titus. “I’ll accompany you back to the Ministry. We have to assemble teams immediately to accompany the rest of the world leaders back to their countries. It may be too little too late, but it will be a show of good faith that the Ministry of Magic has not abandoned them in light of today’s tragedy.”

“Already done,” Titus announced curtly. “There is no need for you to return, thank you. The Minister thought it best that we not wait until you could be informed before acting.”

“I see,” Harry said cautiously. “And you, I assume, are spearheading the response?”

“It’s all by the book,” Titus answered, looking away. “Stay with your family and... friends. Which does lead me to ask the following, and I hope you will understand that it’s just my duty. I don’t like it any more than you do.”

“I understand,” Harry nodded wearily. “We were simply celebrating Christmas, Titus. I would have invited you four as well if you hadn’t been on duty.”

Titus nodded slowly and said nothing. James was sure that everyone in the room knew this was a lie. There seemed to be an invisible wall of coldness between Harry and his partner, something that had never been there before. It was unspeakably dismaying to see.

“I am going to assume that the Minister has placed you in charge of the crisis response, then,” Harry commented. “Would that be correct?”

“I’m sorry,” Titus answered, his eyes unflinching. “You understand, I’m sure.”

“Happy Christmas, then, Titus. Same to you, Lucinda, and both of you, Kushing and Peter.”

The two other dark figures, who still wore their cowls, shifted uncomfortably on their feet.

A moment later, Titus raised a callused hand, palm out, toward Harry. James didn’t know if it was a gesture of apology or warning.

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Then, with a swirl of motion and a crack of collapsing air, Titus vanished. The other three followed immediately.

Harry released a long sigh.

“The American vice president,” Uncle George shook his head. “Dead by a wizard’s hand. This most certainly does not bode well.”

“An understatement, I assure you,” Professor Jackson seethed quietly, turning back to the dining room. The others shuffled disconsolately, following him and muttering. Draco Malfoy, James noticed, was nowhere in sight. Likely, he had disappeared at the first sign of trouble.

“I’m tempted to ask what you were doing out of the attic,” Harry said, looking down at his son with a tired shake of his head. “But I’m sure I already know. Are you alone?”

“No,” James answered helplessly. “Rose and Albus, too. They’re still upstairs as far as I know, cornered by Kreacher. Kreachers, actually.”

Harry nodded, not requiring any explanation. “Come along. I’ll explain to Kreacher. We’ll discuss your punishment later.”

James was suddenly too exhausted to protest. The adrenaline that had flooded his body during the battle seemed to have transformed into a sleeping potion. He trudged alongside his father and followed him up the main staircase.

“What’s going on with you and Titus, Dad?” he asked, keeping his voice low as they climbed the steps.

His father didn’t answer right away. Then, without turning around, he said, “Titus is just following orders. He’s good at that. That’s why he’s always been my right hand man. He’s determined. He’s strong. The problem now, I suppose... is that someone besides me is giving the orders.”

“Is he really hunting down Petra?” James asked, coming alongside his father as they reached the landing. Harry stopped and glanced down at his son, his brow furrowed.

“How do you know...?” he asked, and then shook his head again. “Nevermind. How can I blame you? I’d have found a way to eavesdrop as well, I imagine. You’ll make a fine Auror someday, son. Until then, you’re like to drive your mother and I mad.”

James opened his mouth to respond, but his father silenced him with a raised hand. “Titus is following orders, son, just like I said. Petra is the most wanted person in all the magical world, perhaps the entire

word in general. And is that any surprise? You saw what she did last summer.”

“She was saving your life, Dad!” James insisted in a hushed voice. “Those W.U.L.F. assassins were going to kill you! She had to stop them somehow!”

“She *didn't* have to, actually,” Harry said, his face hardening slightly. “Don’t misunderstand. I’m glad to still be alive, and I have her to thank for it I suppose. And yet it’s hard to imagine that we would have faced that danger in the first place if not for her.”

“It wasn’t her, dad! You have to believe me! It was the Lady of the Lake! And Morgan, the other version of Petra from some other reality!”

But his father’s eyes had closed wearily. James knew it was pointless to discuss the Lady of the Lake, even with his own dad. When Harry opened his eyes again, they were grave.

“Either way, Titus has been charged with finding Petra. And James, when he confronts her, he won’t shy away from using whatever force is necessary. He won’t let her escape.”

“You mean,” James said coldly, “that he’ll kill her.”

“As I said, son, so far as the Ministry is concerned, Petra is the most dangerous person alive. And listen to me: they may be correct.”

“But you’re looking for her, too,” James said quickly. “You and the new Order of the Phoenix. Right?”

Harry rolled his eyes impatiently at the mention of the Order, but James overrode him. “You all are looking for Petra, too. Why? Why not just let Titus handle it?”

Harry leaned closer to his son. “Because Titus may not succeed. Or perhaps even worse, he might. After what we saw last summer, a climactic confrontation with Petra Morganstern may be the most dangerous thing imaginable, not just for those who confront her, but everyone else as well.”

“So you mean to capture her, too? But in a different way?”

Harry pressed his lips together firmly, thoughtfully. After a moment, he exhaled. “We don’t mean to capture her,” he answered quietly. “Capture may not even be possible. We mean...” he paused, seeming to look for the words. “We mean... to talk to her.”

James considered this and a sense of almost inexplicable relief fell over him. He nodded his understanding and allowed his gaze to drift,

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roaming over the landing, over the portrait of old Mrs. Black and her incessantly flickering, flashing painted television. He froze.

“What is it, son?” Harry asked, seeing James’ suddenly widened eyes.

James couldn’t speak. He stared at the telly screen, not hearing the words that squawked from it, not seeing the leering gaze of old Mrs. Black as she stared out of the portrait, grinning with sudden malevolence, as if she knew a dark, vicious secret. James raised his arm and pointed weakly, shakily.

“It’s him,” he said, surprised at how calm his own voice sounded.

Harry turned, frowning, and regarded the painted telly screen. On it, a news program was reporting the sudden death of the American vice president. Words crawled across the top of the screen: JOE MATTIGAN, DEAD AT 56 OF NATURAL CAUSES WHILE VACATIONING WITH FAMILY. PRESIDENT DRUMMOND NAMES NEW VICE PRESIDENT IN EMERGENCY MEETING...

Below the running words, President Drummond himself stood before a blue podium, the American Presidential seal emblazoned neatly on its front. The president was speaking, his expression serious, his posture carefully composed to express both mourning and determination. And yet, beneath this, even through the painted telly screen, James sensed that the president was nervous. Perhaps even terrified. Standing next to the president, his face coldly handsome, dressed in a natty navy suit and red tie, was the man James had last seen in the empty streets of New Amsterdam, the man who had conjured native American monsters out of thin air, all while grinning viciously. Now, the handsome face nodded solemnly as the president introduced him.

“Quincy Quartermain,” Harry read as the President identified the man. “The man elected to the seat of recently deceased Senator Charles Filmore. You know him, James?”

James shuddered as the man on the screen stepped forward, replacing the president at the podium. He spoke, and the camera zoomed close.

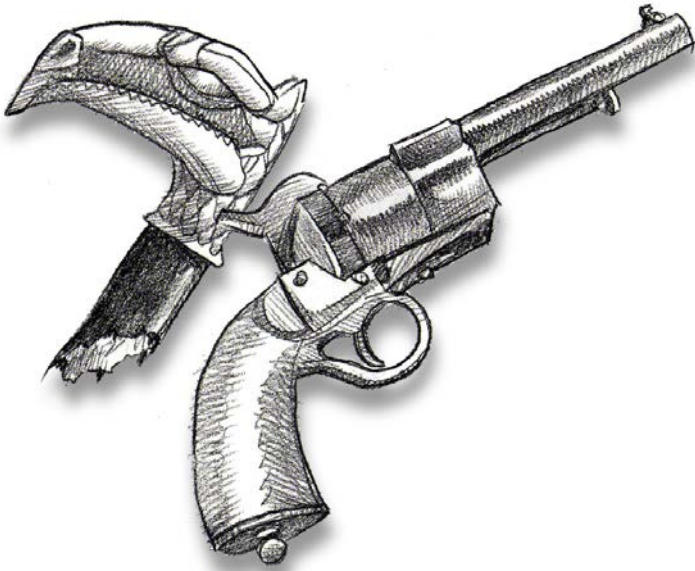
“I want to thank President Drummond for the strength he has shown in this difficult time. I cannot hope to surpass Joe Mattigan. But as your new Vice President, I hope to serve you, the people of this country, with the same character, perseverance and uncompromising conviction that he has always stood for.”

With that, he turned to regard the president with a smile. President Drummond, James saw, flinched slightly away from that smile.

“I don’t care what he’s calling himself,” James said, unable to tear his eyes away from the man on the screen. “But he’s no Muggle. He’s a wizard. He’s evil. And the last time I saw him, he called himself.. the Collector.”



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11. QUINN'S STORY

A series of rattling clanks ran the length of the Hogwarts Express as the great red train began to crawl out of King's Cross station, emerging into a fine, greasy drizzle. James shared a compartment with Rose, Ralph, Albus, Louis and Lily, who leaned against his shoulder, half-lidded, watching London scroll past the rain-smearred windows as if it was the world's most boring movie. As the narrow streets and buildings began to whicker past, James saw that most of the snow had melted, leaving only grimy slush and dripping gutters.

No one spoke.

The end of the holiday had been uncomfortably urgent and hushed. James understood it only vaguely. The strangely antagonistic appearance of Titus Hardcastle had apparently solidified a growing rift in the Auror department. On one side was James' father, Harry, head of the department and reluctantly famous symbol of the fight against dark magic. On the other side, rather shockingly, was Titus Hardcastle, long-time loyal partner, but sudden confidante and trusted favourite of the

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Minister of Magic and his closest advisor, Hogwarts' very own headmaster Grudje.

Of course, nothing official had changed. Harry Potter was still in charge of the Auror department. And yet there was a definite shift in responsibilities, with Hardcastle being assigned the bulk of the active duties, while Harry was increasingly waylaid for diplomatic and ambassadorial missions.

Professor McGonagall, who had remained long into the night after Hardcastle's appearance on Christmas night, had admitted her own suspicions.

"Hardcastle is an obedient soldier," she had spat under her breath, her eyes flashing like flint. "Not a thinking man. That's why they prefer him over you, Harry. He follows orders and does not question them. Men like him are invaluable to tyrants."

James' father had not been as confident. "Loquacious Knapp is hardly a tyrant," he sighed, helping Ron Weasley to shrink the dining room back to its normal size. "It's complicated. Ever since the debacle in the states last year, when I fell under the suspicion of the Magical Integration Bureau, the Ministry has thought it best that mine not be the face of national wizarding enforcement. It's politics, plain and simple."

James had a feeling that, in a way, they were both right. This was made all the more disturbing by the appearance of The Collector in the guise of the new American vice president. It wasn't so much that his father doubted James' word-- he had, in fact, shown great seriousness and trust regarding the subject-- but that there seemed to be very little he could do about it.

"The Minister of Magic won't hear a word of it," he admitted reluctantly. "The fact is, there are conspiracies and threats everywhere, what with the magical world infringing more and more into Muggle affairs. But I will be watching, and not just me. There are plenty who remain loyal. Even some of those who work alongside Titus. Lucinda, for instance."

James had spluttered. "But...! She shot at me! She was with him tonight when they fell on this place like a load of thieves!"

"Lucinda is different," Harry insisted, his brow darkening. "She follows orders, but she thinks. She's caught between loyalties. Don't think this is easy for her. She'll be true in the end. Trust me."

By the time he, Albus and Rose had been returned to the attic, under the malevolent gaze of a very disgruntled Kreacher, it had been nearly midnight. And even then, Ralph, Lily and the others had insisted on a detailed explanation of everything that had happened. The bulk of this responsibility fell on James, who alone had overheard the discussion in the dining room and observed the arrival of Hardcastle and his aurors. Finally, hours later, he had told them the most important bit of all.

“The Collector,” he shook his head wearily. “He isn’t hiding out in New Amsterdam anymore, enslaving people to help make his Murrigan Web super weapon. He’s somehow wormed his way into becoming the new American vice president. Probably sent his own people to kill off the old one, just so he could take his place.”

Saying it out loud, James realized just how truly frightening it was. The others seemed to sense it as well, their glassy, tired eyes shining with shock and disbelief. All except for Victoire and Louis, who were incredulous of the entire affair.

“You’re all bloody deluded,” Louis announced grumpily, reaching to blow out the lantern over his bunk. “Even if you did meet some evil wizard bloke in New Amsterdam, it can’t be the same one whose taking over the vice presidency. There’s, like, laws about that sort of thing. The president can’t just name any old mate of his to the vice presidency.”

No one responded to Louis’ objection, partly because they were too tired, but also partly because, as James could see on Rose’s and Ralph’s faces, they secretly wanted to believe him. Suddenly, the thrill of the mystery had become a very real stab of fear, the sense that things had begun to spin out of control on a truly monumental and terrifying scale.

If a dark wizard had murdered and tricked his way into becoming the second most powerful man in the Muggle free world, what would keep him from finishing the job? What would stop the Collector from killing the president and taking over completely? Isn’t that-- the conquering and subjugation of the Muggle world-- what the darkest of dark wizards had always striven for? Voldemort had attempted it via insurrections in the wizarding world, armies of dark comrades, and widespread magical terrorism. Now, the Collector (and his mysterious benefactor) seemed poised to finish the task with simple treachery. It would have been impossible but for the all-important erosion of the Vow of Secrecy, set in motion by Petra Morganstern, months ago.

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James slept very little that night. He sensed, by the restless noises coming from the bunks around him, that he wasn't alone.

Thus, as the Hogwarts Express wound its way into the foggy patchwork of fields and rolling hills, lorded over by a pall of low, slate clouds, it was a worn and weary group that lolled in James' compartment. All except for Louis, who had snoozed until ten in the morning and was as chipper as a wood sprite.

"All right," he announced finally, "who wants to play Winkles and Augers? James? You're always worth a laugh."

"Quiet," Ralph muttered, receding further into the collar of his heavy cloak.

"You all are a load of chuckles," Louis announced in exasperation. "I should have gone with Scorpius to spy out the Slytherins. Scorpius may be a smarmy little berk, but the Slytherins always have good snacks."

"Well you'll just have to pardon us," Rose stiffened. "We were up all night discussing the end of the world is all."

"Even if it is the end of the world," Louis said, rolling his eyes, "doesn't mean we have to mope around like a load of Flobberworm." He climbed onto his seat, reached for James' bag on the overhead rack, and began to rummage through it. "Where's your wand, James? No one's quite as much fun to beat at Winkles and Augers as you."

James turned away, flapping a hand irritably. "Get out of my things, you obnoxious git. My wand's not even in there."

"For once you actually have it on your person?" Albus said archly. "That's about as shocking as you showing up on time for a Quidditch try-out."

"Ow!" Louis suddenly cried. "What the bloody...?"

James turned back. Louis was frowning down at something in his hand. "You really need to clear out your luggage a little more often, James. You've got a load of weeds or something growing in the bottom of it."

"Give me those!" James announced, jumping to his feet. "Those are mine."

Louis jumped down, cocking his head suspiciously. "Tell me what they are."

"The Yuxa Baslatma," Ralph said wonderingly, spying the pair of spiny burs in Louis' hand. "I totally forgot about those. But..." he

glanced back at James. “But Professor Avior took them from you, didn’t he?”

James sighed. “He took the ones Zane found on my robe. There were a few more stuck in the hem. I discovered them before leaving for the holidays.”

“Yuxa Baslatma,” Rose repeated. “Dream inducers? Let me see.”

Louis shrugged and dumped the spiny burs into Rose’s upturned hand. “Ugly little things if you ask me. What do they do?”

Rose peered at the burs carefully. “Well, if they are what Ralph says, they are seriously magical objects, though really unpredictable, and pretty dangerous. Where did you say you got them?”

James and Ralph described their experience in Professor Avior’s Durmstrang class, explaining how the Yuxa Baslatma had attached itself to James’ robe, leaving a mass of burs that had been subsequently confiscated by Avior.

“But he didn’t get them all,” Rose nodded knowledgeably, “because the Yuxa Baslatma had chosen you. Which plant was it?”

“What’s that matter?” Albus interjected. “Just work the magic, already. It’s a divination tool, right? Maybe it’ll tell us how James here will meet his ultimate demise. It’ll be dead boring, I wager.”

Rose rolled her eyes impatiently. “These aren’t like Trelawney’s tea cups, you dolt. This is powerful magic. There are hardly any real Yuxa Baslatma left in the world. It sounds like Avior has the biggest collection of them anywhere. If these aren’t used properly, they can be extremely dangerous. And it’s important to know which plant these came from, since they all do slightly different things.”

Ralph nodded, remembering. “It was something about the answer to your most important question.”

James agreed. “‘The question which vexes you most’. That was the exact wording, I think.”

“Well,” Louis chimed in, “That’s an easy one. Which one of you is the most totally daft. My money is on James.”

Lily gave Louis a shove, and then stood up, brushing her hair out of her face. “What makes it dangerous, Rose?”

Rose handed the burs back to James. “It’s simple, really. They’re dream inducers. They do their work only when the subject is asleep. Drop one in some water, drink it down, and go to sleep. Ten or fifteen minutes later, the magic happens as a very powerful, very real dream. But

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if you aren't asleep when they take effect, they can be... well, pretty harmful."

Lily frowned. "What's 'pretty harmful'?"

"They drive you completely mad," Ralph admitted. "The dream fights against the waking world, overloading the mind and pretty much making it go kablooeey."

"So get to it, then, James." Albus urged, plopping onto his seat. "Swallow those things down and have a little nap. We'll wait. When you wake up, you can tell us the answer to our most vexing question."

"It's not that simple," Rose insisted irritably. "We should know what the question *is*."

"Well that's obvious, isn't it?" Lily suggested. "How do we stop this Collector person?"

Albus shook his head. "That's not the biggest question at all. It's how to find Petra Morganstern. She's the key to the whole thing, isn't she?"

"Even if we knew where Petra was," Rose objected, "It doesn't mean anyone can catch her. I think the most vexing question is who Avior Dorchascathan is. That's probably why he tried to confiscate the dream inducers from you, James. He's trying to protect his secrets-- what he knows about the Morrigan Web and what his connection to Albus Dumbledore is."

"What if the question is supposed to be about Headmaster Grudje?" Louis interjected. "Why's he so scary and vicious, giving Filch powers and shutting down the post and all?"

Ralph spoke up. "You're all forgetting the most important thing of all. The big question is what the Morrigan Web is. What does it do and how do we stop it?"

James shook his head slowly. "This is the problem, isn't it? They're all really serious questions. All of them are important. How do I know which one really is the one the dream inducer wants to answer?"

"I have a novel idea," Albus shrugged. "Why don't you just try it and find out?"

Ralph nodded thoughtfully. "It's worth a try. What's the worst that could happen?"

Rose stared hard at the burs in James' hand. "I guess most of the danger really is just in getting to sleep. I suppose the answer will explain the question, once you wake up. Perhaps Albus is right."

“I don’t know,” James said, suddenly hesitant. The burs prickled in his palm, tickling it slightly. “Maybe one of you should do it instead. Rose, you try it. You’re the smartest one of all of us.”

“Hah,” Albus scoffed.

“I can’t,” Rose replied, putting her fists on her hips. “The Yuxa Baslatma chose you. It will only work for you. For me, or any of the rest of us, it would just be a really strange, wild dream, full of nonsense.”

“Like all of my dreams,” Ralph nodded.

James gulped. “Suddenly I’m not all that tired.”

“Oh, we can totally help with that,” Louis said cheerfully, jumping to his feet. “We can make you a nice bed out of all our cloaks and then shoot them full of sleep charms. Rose knows those backward and forward, right Rose?”

Rose nodded. “Sure, yeah. They’re super simple, and work a treat. What do you say, James?”

James looked from Rose, to Albus, to Louis, to Ralph. All of them looked back at him with hopeful expectancy. Finally, he looked aside at Lily.

“You don’t have to, James,” she said worriedly. “It doesn’t seem all that safe. Perhaps it isn’t worth it.”

Strangely, his sister’s warning helped make up James’ mind. “I don’t think we can afford not to try,” he said, mustering his determination. “And I guess I’d rather try it with all your help than by myself in the dormitory.”

“Excellent!” Albus declared, producing his wand. “This is better than Winkles and Augers any day. Everyone toss your cloaks and stuff here on the bench. Rose, warm up those sleeping charms.”

A few minutes later, James clambered awkwardly onto the pile of cloaks, stretching out full length on his back.

“You don’t look like you’re ready for a nap,” Rose criticized. “You look more like a dead body that misplaced its casket.”

“I’m not used to napping with a load of people gathered around staring at me!” James complained nervously. “All of you just cram in on the other bench and quit ogling.”

“How’re those sleep charms working, then?” Ralph asked, wedging himself into a seat next to Rose. “Feeling tired yet?”

“I feel less tired than I have my whole life.” James grouched. This was not entirely true, however. Even as he lay on the cushion of cloaks,

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his fists crossed over his chest, he could feel the subtle magic of the charms seeping into his body, loosening his tight shoulders and relaxing his tensed jaw.

Lily was the only one still standing. “Here, James,” she said, handing him a small bottle. “It’s what’s left of Louis’ liquorice soda. It’ll have to do.”

James sat up (with some effort, considering the effects of the sleep charms) and accepted the bottle. He opened his other fist, revealing the somewhat mashed pair of burs. “You think I should do the whole thing?” he asked, turning to Rose.

“All or nothing,” Albus nodded. “Down the hatch already.”

Rose merely shrugged. “Too much might be dangerous. Perhaps you want to save one for another question? If they even work that way.”

James took a deep breath. Finally, he tipped his hand over the mouth of the bottle, allowing both burs to roll into it. They caught there and he poked them with his finger until they plopped inside. He shook the bottle slightly, nervously, and then held it up to the light of the window.

“They’ve dissolved already,” he said.

Louis rolled his eyes. “They’re magic. Drink up.”

James didn’t like taking orders from Louis, but there didn’t seem to be any point in putting it off. He sniffed the bottle, which smelled strongly of black liquorice (with only a hint of something wild and musty), then, squeezing his eyes shut and holding his breath, he tipped the bottle against his lips. He gulped until the bottle was empty.

“How was it?” Lily asked, a bit breathlessly.

James shrugged, stifling a belch and handing the bottle to her. “Like liquorice soda. I don’t like it any old time, but it didn’t taste any different than ever. I wouldn’t have even known the dream inducers were in it.”

“Make with the napping, then,” Albus insisted, leaning forward in his seat. “You’ve only got ten minutes before magical brain scramble time.”

“No pressure, though,” Lily squeaked.

James flopped backwards onto the bed of cloaks. He knew that, on some level, he was nervous. But the feeling was distant, almost academic. Mostly, what he felt was a pervasive sense of extreme comfort, as if every muscle in his body, including his brain, had happily turned into

pudding. The others continued to talk as he closed his eyes, but their voices were suddenly unimportant and far away. The subtle shimmy-rattle of the train became a lullaby, escorting him down, down, through descending layers of consciousness, until all that remained was a fog of expectancy.

The answer to my most vexing question, he thought dimly, concentrating on the words, trying to cling to them.

The train lumbered on beneath him, and suddenly the journey seemed much longer than usual. It was no longer a journey of mere hours and miles; it was a journey of years and leagues, across oceans, over decades, spiralling below normal sleep and into something as bottomless as space and endless as time.

And slowly, on the other side of that great divide, James began to wake up.



“For Fredericka,” a girl’s voice said faintly. James looked to the side. A young woman, barely older than James himself, stood nearby. In her outstretched hand, smoking lazily, was a small pistol.

“For Fredericka,” she repeated faintly, “from her fiancé, William. And from me, her sister. Helen.”

James followed the aim of the pistol and saw a man lying face down, obviously dead. There was nothing else to see-- only the girl (Helen) and the dead man (Magnussen!), surrounded by infinite black void. But then, slowly, shapes began to resolve out of the dark. James looked around as buildings unsheathed from the empty fog all around. Wet cobbles spread away from Magnussen’s body. Barrels and crates shimmered into view, cramming a narrow, dank alley.

I’ve been here before, James said, but his voice was silent, merely a thought in the void. He looked down and saw that he had no shape or

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form whatsoever. It was as if he was a ghost, invisible and unimportant, a mere observer in a world that was not his own. A shock of panic overwhelmed him and he turned on the spot, seeking some help or even a friendly face.

The first face he saw, however, was his own. His cheeks were pallid in the darkness, lit only by a guttering gas lamp near the mouth of the alley. His eyes were wide with shock. His wand was lowering in his hand.

“We’re sorry for what happened to Fredericka,” a voice-- Ralph’s-- said solemnly. “This man may have been a part of our world... but we aren’t like him.”

James suddenly saw it all. This was the night that he, Ralph and Zane had gone in search of the dimensional key, a magical silver horseshoe held by the powerful and sadistic Alma Aleron professor Ignatius Magnussen. Having followed the professor into mid-nineteenth century Philadelphia, they had witnessed the rather shocking truth of his demise-- that rather than escaping into the World Between the Worlds with the aid of his dimensional key, Magnussen had been cut down by a single Muggle bullet, fired by a young woman, the sister of one of Magnussen’s victims.

But why was James here now, watching it happen again? Was he meant to stop it somehow? Or was he meant to see something that he had missed the first time?

James watched as Helen met a young Muggle man (William?) near Magnussen’s corpse. The man limped slightly; he had nearly been killed by Magnussen and his vicious magical cane before Helen had appeared at the mouth of the alley, the pistol in her hand and vengeance in her heart. The man knelt, pried the cane out of the dead man’s slab-like hand, and then, with a determined grimace, snapped the cane over his knee.

James knew what happened next-- he had already lived it once. William (the one-time fiancé of the murdered Fredericka) took the velvet bag containing the dimensional key from Magnussen’s other hand. He gave it to James, Ralph and Zane, who quickly made their exit, splashing through puddles as they dashed back to Alma Aleron and the fabled Timelock.

But dreaming James did not follow them. Surprisingly, he remained with Helen and William as they began to walk in the other direction, much more slowly, leaving Magnussen’s body hidden under a

pile of rubbish. And slowly, almost imperceptibly, the surroundings began to fade away again, receding into darkness like actors slipping behind a curtain, until all that remained was Helen and William, walking slowly away, huddled together and strangely silent.

And somehow James knew there was something secretly important about them. They were the main story now, not he, Ralph and Zane. He watched the young man and woman as they dwindled into distance.

In Helen's apron pocket, still warm and smelling of spent gunpowder, was the small six-shot revolver. In William's hand, clutched loosely, was the broken head of Magnussen's cane, its eyes dark and diminished, but not dead. Never dead.

A cold wind buffeted over James, taking away the vision of William and Helen, the revolver and the cane. James sensed their story happening beyond the reach of that wind, as if the wind was time itself, stripping away days and weeks, months and years. Helen and William, strangely but not quite surprisingly, fell in love. They were married, and eventually they moved out of the grimy warren of Philadelphia's wharf district and started a new life in the Pennsylvania countryside. There was a ramshackle (but lovingly maintained) farmhouse, surrounded by carefully planted fields, ribbons of straight, narrow roads, and a fresh, bubbling spring.

And there were children. They were happy in the farmhouse, or at least as happy as siblings can be, with their constant rivalries, dramas and petty quarrels. There were three daughters and one son, the youngest of the lot. The son's name was Phillip, and James saw him grow through the years, becoming a fine young man, thin and tall, with a sharp, witty, inquisitive mind.

When Philip was twenty-five, his mother, Helen, died. The illness had fallen over her quickly, in the form of a fierce cold that had blossomed into pneumonia. Philip's sisters lamented how suddenly fate moved, taking their mother in mere days, but Philip was secretly grateful. He was old enough to have seen how lingering illnesses can sometimes diminish their victims, leeching them slowly of joy, dignity, and purpose. Even in his grief, he was glad for his vibrant, joyful mother; glad that she had left the world swiftly, like a young bride eloping with fate, rather than being dragged along by it, slowly and reluctantly.

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James hovered outside the old farmhouse as the funeral took place. He sensed the grief and sadness within, the celebration of a life well lived. The faint sound of hymn singing leaked into the evening air, led by the bereaved husband, William, his tenor voice not precisely musical, but strong and clear.

And then, sometime later, as the sun descended into the trees that fringed the fields, turning the sky a cauldron of copper and pink, Philip emerged from the house. He moved quietly, quickly, almost (James recognized this from his own adventures) furtively, dashing along a path between the fields, looking back once or twice to assure he was not followed.

James approached him, followed him silently, as the young man turned east, toward a thin strand of trees, and a rocky gully that bordered it.

Something was buried there. James sensed it pulsing in the earth, felt the pull of its dark magic and undiminished will. Philip was a Muggle, and yet he seemed aware of the buried force as well. Of course he did, for he had been there on the day his mother had buried it, many years earlier. He had been just a boy then, and when his mother had finished her task and returned to the farmhouse, he had dashed into the gully himself, curious to see what she had hidden away there under the rocks. Because Philip understood something that no one else did: his mother-- the woman who darned the holes in his socks and sprinkled brown sugar on his oatmeal, who hummed happily to herself from beyond the closed upstairs door of her bedroom every morning and who tucked him in each night with a kiss on his forehead and both cheeks-- his plain, pretty, everyday mother... *was magic*.

James understood. Helen had been no witch, but neither had she been purely Muggle. Like Petra's sister, Izzy, Helen had occupied a strange middle ground between the polarities of power, instinctively following some deep, magical instinct, but not aware of it enough to embrace it. That's how she had known to come to the alley on that fateful night in 1859, the pistol stashed in her apron, arriving at the very moment to save her future husband's life. Her secret magic had compelled her. She herself didn't understand it, but neither did she question it.

It was her subtle charms that had made the fields flourish, that conjured the spring to irrigate the farm in the midst of drought, that

allowed her poultices and broths to keep her family almost preternaturally healthy and strong over the decades.

And it was her unspoken magic that warned her to bury the tin box with its secret dark treasures out in the gully, beneath the stones and spiders and rough yellow weeds. Inside the house, even hidden away in the attic, the gravity of those treasures was just too strong. Helen had sensed it in her bed each night, heard the insistent, silent call. She worried that eventually her children would hear it, and respond to it.

So she buried her dark treasures. Unfortunately, the very magic that compelled her is what drew her young son to follow her, to watch, and to become curious.

And now, almost twenty years later, on the night of Helen's funeral, Philip returned to the gully. He didn't know why he moved so secretly, so nervously. He only knew that the pull of his curiosity-- and some other, less definable force-- was too strong to deny.

James instinctively tried to call out to the young man, to warn him back. But of course he had no voice here. He was merely an observer, no more able to alter these events than he could hold back the course of the earth around the sun.

Philip pried up the stone and produced a pen knife from his coat pocket. With it, he began to dig, tossing aside crumbles of wormy earth, until the knife scratched metal. A minute later, he wrenched a rusty tin box from the ground and set it, almost reverently, on the rocks. He shivered as he stared at, fearing the box, but apparently unable to deny its attraction.

He had seen its contents once before, although that time he had left them buried. His mother knew what was best, after all, and if she had buried them, it had been for good reason. Now, however, Philip was a grown man, and his mother (tears pricked the corners of his eyes as he thought this) was soon to be buried herself. Perhaps the magic was broken now.

This was not true, of course. But the rationalization worked. With mud-caked fingernails, Philip pried the lid from the tin box. It came away with a screech, revealing its contents. Both James and Philip peered inside.

Cradled in the rusty box were two objects. James recognized them immediately. One was the pistol that had killed the wizard, Ignatius Magnussen. The other was the head of his wickedly magical cane, its

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gargoyle's face leering and unblinking, tarnished black but glinting in the dying sunset.

Philip took both of them, and with that single, swift motion, darkness fell over James again, engulfing him utterly.

Time blew past again. Decades unravelled as Philip aged. He took a wife, had a son of his own, and became an old man. James saw him again in a brief, fleeting moment, laying on his deathbed, his grown son standing by his side. The tin was open between them, revealing the pistol and the iron gargoyle's head. Philip had kept them, treasured them despite their aura of dark mystery, or perhaps even because of it.

"These belonged to my mother," he said, his voice weak and rasping. "And now they are yours."

But James could see that the son was repelled by the strange, enigmatic objects in the ancient tin. He took them, but he did not reverence them. Soon enough, the tin was packed away in the attic of a tidy brick house in Philadelphia, all but forgotten, gathering dust through the cycle of decades.

Until a woman's hand bumped against the tin, knocking it aside with a clatter. James watched as the darkness receded again, revealing the depths of the attic, much more cluttered and altered by time, lit by the flat brilliance of falling snow outside a single gabled window. The woman was thin, pretty, with a hint of the long departed Helen in her features. And yet she was sad, somehow. Partly it was the task she was engaged in: emptying the house after the death of her oldest grandfather. But that wasn't all of it. This woman (*her name is Winnifred, James' dreaming mind supplied with strange certainty, but everyone calls her Whinnie*) was living a life of misfortune and heartbreak. Her five year old son, who even now played on the living room carpet two floors below, was weak with some complicated illness, requiring doctors and medicines she could not afford. Whinnie's husband was no help, having left almost a year earlier, ostensibly in search of employment back east, where he had grown up. Whinnie had not heard anything from him since, and doubted she ever would again. He wasn't injured, or missing. He was just gone.

Whinnie pried the tin box open impatiently, and then paused. Puzzled, she held first the pistol, and then the gargoyle's head up to the wintry light. A thoughtful look passed over her face, but it was much different than that which had appeared on the face of her great grandfather, Philip, almost a century earlier. The year was nineteen

seventy-eight, and Whinnie's life had not prepared her for a sensitivity to magic. It had, however, made her acutely sensitive to the possibility of quick money. She desperately needed it, after all. It was just possible, she mused somewhat hopelessly, that the iron gargoyle sculpture and antique pistol might be worth something. Whinnie pocketed the objects, vowing (albeit guiltily) not to tell her brother about them. He wasn't desperate like her. And perhaps if he had been more willing to help her (everyone knew he could have, if he'd wanted to) she wouldn't have had to resort to such petty means.

It was weak justification, and Whinnie knew it. Deep down, she hated herself for it. But self-recrimination wasn't enough to change her mind. She clumped down the attic steps, calling for her son to put on his coat and shoes.

Another rush of wind carried James with it, but this one was different. It covered mere space, not time, and James knew that what he now observed was only a short while later, across the city, outside a cramped storefront on a windy street corner. Icy snowflakes scoured the store's windows, blurring the odd collection on display: musical instruments and small Muggle appliances, stacks of cheap books with their page edges dyed yellow or red, antique lamps and cheap glass sculptures. Over the recessed front door were hung three tarnished metal balls, swinging beneath a sign painted with faded red letters:

PAWN SHOP - BUY - SELL - TRADE

Whinnie's car, a large, strangely evil-looking machine with rust-edged fenders and the word *Toronado* emblazoned on the corner of its boot, sat idling a block away. Whinnie's son, James knew, was not inside, nor was he with his mother, inside the pawn shop. The boy had been left in the care of his uncle, Whinnie's brother. None of them had been particularly happy with the arrangement, but (as Whinnie promised) it would only be for a short while.

As James looked at the plume of exhaust puffing into the frigid air from the idling car, then at the storefront a block away, he had a terrible suspicion that Whinnie was quite wrong about that.

A bell jingled faintly as the pawn shop door opened. Whinnie emerged, and the staccato clack of her heels told James all he needed to know. She had only sold one of the mysterious objects, and she had not

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gotten anything near as much money as she had hoped. Fuming and worried, she stalked toward her waiting car and James, almost against his will, moved to follow her.

A couple was walking ahead of them on the footpath. James saw that they were man and woman, both wearing black, but they were not man and wife. Sister and brother? He thought yes.

Whinnie stalked forward, the cold wind turning her cheeks bright red, and as she approached the couple, angling to pass them, the couple stopped in their tracks.

A thrill of fear ran down James' spine, for he saw immediately that the couple were magical. American witches and wizards dressed far more like their Muggle counterparts, but the clarity of his dreaming mind was undeniable. The man and woman glanced up at Whinnie, simultaneously and intently. Of course they did, for they sensed the hidden power of what she was carrying, even if they didn't know what it was.

"Excuse me," the woman said suddenly, unsmiling. "Might we have a word?"

Whinnie paused only for a moment. "It's cold and I'm in no mood," she muttered, brushing past.

"I'm afraid we must insist," the man said, and his arm snaked out, grasping Whinnie's elbow in a vice-like grip.

Whinnie snapped backwards like a dog on a leash, her feet slipping on the icy footpath so that she nearly fell-- would have fallen, in fact, if not for the man's stony fist. Immediately, James glanced about the street in search of help, but the footpath-- indeed the entire avenue-- was empty, filled only with parked cars, moaning wind and skirls of snow.

"What are you--!" Whinnie exclaimed angrily, righting herself and attempting to pry her arm loose of the man's grasp. "Let go of me, you lunatic!"

Instead, the man pushed her forward, into the recessed entryway of a closed bookstore. His sister followed, her eyes flashing with bright interest.

"You're a Muggle!" she said, smiling tightly. "Aren't you? You're not even a witch!"

"A wi--" Whinnie stammered, fear beginning to replace her anger. "What are you, crazy? Get out of my face! I'll call the police!"

“The police!” the man scoffed. “Feel free. None are within five blocks of here. And even if they were right next to us, they would hear nothing unless we wished them to. Now give over your talisman.”

Whinnie blinked at him in consternation. His words made no sense. Instead, she renewed her struggle against the man’s grip.

Across the street, a bedraggled man peered out of an alley. James saw him, saw his bleary, red-rimmed eyes and scraggly beard. He was a bum, huddled pathetically against the cold, but curious at the raised voices.

“For your own sake,” the sister declared impatiently, “quit fighting and answer our question. You have no right to whatever it is you’re holding. Did you think we would not sense it? It’s useless to you anyway. What could you, a Muggle, hope to do with it? Hand it over and we’ll be on our way.”

“I have no clue what you’re blabbing about!” Whinnie cried furiously, finally wrenching her arm loose and stumbling backwards between the bookstore’s dark display windows and toward its closed security gate. It rattled as she fell against it. “You’re both completely crazy! Get out of my way so I can get home to my son!”

“Your son will grow up without a mother unless you give us what you have, Muggle,” the man replied with vicious confidence. His hand dipped into his coat and withdrew a long, black wand. His sister raised her own, fingering it with relish. Whinnie stared at them, at their extended wands, and shook her head in confusion.

“Look, you’ve obviously mistaken me for someone else. I don’t know what you want. I’ve got almost nothing on me. Here.” She fumbled in her purse, producing a small, thin wallet. “Here’s the twenty bucks I got for that stupid little sculpture. That’s all I have but you can take it. Take it and let me go.” She tossed the wallet toward them, but the brother and sister simply let it fall to the cracked tile floor of the alcove.

“You think it will protect you, don’t you?” the sister said suspiciously. “Is that it? Surely you cannot be so stupid. You don’t even know how to use it. We do. We can smell its power, whatever it is. We don’t care how you found it, or where it came from. Just give it to us. Give it to us and you can go. Refuse us...” she shrugged with one shoulder and gestured with her wand. “Refuse us and you will die, and we will have it anyway.”

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“I don’t know what you mean!” Whinnie screamed, pressing back into the security gate, making it rattle again. She did not know what the wands were, but somehow (James gave her credit for this) she sensed they were dangerous.

“It is very powerful,” the brother breathed, stepping forward, his nostrils flaring.

His sister nodded. “But what is it? We must have it.”

Their shadows crept over Whinnie as they advanced on her, their wands pointing at her heart. Whinnie shrank back, cringing, and then, suddenly and desperately, she rammed her hand into her purse again. She grasped something, yanked it out, and flung the purse away.

“Back off!” she screamed, raising her trembling fist. In it, shaking wildly, was the antique pistol, its round barrel glistening blackly in the pale light.

Across the street, the observing bum gasped and hunkered behind a trash can. James’ sharpened, dreaming senses saw it all.

The sister and brother stared at the weapon in Whinnie’s hand. Then, happily, the sister began to laugh. “Muggles and their weapons,” she shook her head. “My dear, that antique pop-gun cannot hurt us. You’re wasting time, and our patience is running thin. Give us your talisman. Do it now, or we will take it from your corpse.”

Whinnie locked her elbow, holding the pistol full length. She had never held a gun before, was not exactly sure that she could pull the trigger, even if she knew it would fire, which she did not. She pointed it alternately at the woman, then the man.

The sister lunged. James saw it, saw the sudden, almost bestial litheness of it, and he once again tried to call out a warning. This time, however, his voice would not have been heard even if he’d had one, for a loud, flat *BANG* struck the air, momentarily drowning out every other sound. A split-second later, silence fell, layered only with the senseless moan of the wind and sand-like scurry of blowing snow.

The sister stepped backwards, out from the beneath the bookstore’s awning. She lowered her wand and looked down at herself in the wintry daylight. Drops of blood pattered the icy pavement between her feet. A moment later, she crumped to her knees, looked up in shock, and keeled forward onto her face.

“You...” the brother breathed, his eyes wide and shocked as he looked over his shoulder, his wand still raised in his own fist. “You killed

her.” His voice was filled with wonder. He repeated himself, as if he could scarcely believe his own words. “You *killed* her!”

“I didn’t mean to!” Whinnie pleaded, lowering the smoking pistol. She stared at it in her hand in horror, as if it was a small, vicious monster. “She made me! She was going to--”

“YOU *KILLED* HER!” The brother screamed, so strenuously that his voice cracked and his eyes bulged. He extended his wand, levelled it at Whinnie’s face, and spoke the phrase James dreaded hearing. “*Avada Kedav--*”

A figure bowled into the brother at the exact moment that a bolt of green light leapt from his wand. The bum, after a fierce inner struggle, had bolted across the street, stumbled over the dead witch, and tackled the brother at the precise moment that he cast the killing curse. As a result, the curse exploded in all directions, bouncing off the enclosed display windows, and hurling both the brother and the bum out into the street. They skidded, leaving a long black scrape on the snow. A horn honked suddenly, accompanied by the juddering grind of braking tires. A garbage truck slewed to a halt, barely avoiding the pair in the street. The driver cursed loudly behind the windscreen and wrenched open his door.

The brother scrambled to his feet, waving his wand wildly, but the moment was lost. More people were descending onto the scene now, emerging from nearby shops and vehicles. The brother threw one last look at his dead sister, and then, his face etched with rage, disappeared, leaving only a crack of collapsing air and a swirl of snowy smoke.

“What the ever loving *hell!*?” the garbage truck driver bellowed, leaning out his door. “Weren’t there just... two of you?”

The bum shook his head slowly. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said emphatically. “I’m not crazy. You tell them. Understand? I’m not crazy. And *neither are you.*”

The garbage truck driver stared at the bum, then at the dead woman lying on a pool of dark red blood. After a moment, he nodded agreement. “I’ll radio for the P.D.”

In the shadow of the bookstore’s deep alcove, Whinnie lay dead, strangely unmarked, victim of the killing curse. The pistol was still clenched in her hand.

Darkness descended, again, and this time James welcomed it. He had a sense that the dream was over, that whatever answer the dream was meant to provide, it was now up to him to divine it.

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But the dream pulled him onward again, carrying him in another gust of advancing time. In it, he saw disconnected snippets of the story, like headlines in a shredded issue of *the Daily Prophet*...

The dead witch was a mystery to the police, firstly because she bore not a shred of identification, and no one ever came forward to collect her body. Instead, her corpse lay in the Philadelphia morgue for two days before it was mysteriously stolen in the dead of night, never to be seen again. The second mystery was even more perplexing. The anonymous woman had been killed by a bullet wound to the chest, apparently fired by the other dead woman, one Whinnie Holm. The problem was that the gun in Ms. Holm's hand was over one hundred years old, a rather quaint antique, and empty of bullets. The men in the police forensics laboratory were quite sure that the weapon had not been fired in many, many decades.

Whinnie's son went to live with his last remaining relative, his uncle, who provided well for him financially, but did very little to nurture him. The enigmatic pistol was once again packed away, forgotten in the trunks of his dead mother's things. For simplicity's sake, the boy eventually adopted his uncle's last name and even called him father.

Although he never once really meant it.

And strangely enough, from the moment the antique pistol was packed away in the basement below his feet, the boy never again suffered any ill effects of his old sickness.

These images dissolved into silence as James floated with the wind, carried again into an uncertain future which was still, strangely, someone else's past.

Out of the darkness, Whinnie's old car tooted into view, its engine rumbling roughly, a cloud of blue smoke coughing from its tailpipe. Sunlight flashed daggers from the rusty chrome and dusty windscreen as the car slowed, angled toward a curb, and laboriously, reluctantly, died.

The driver's door opened with a screech and a young man stepped out, blinking affably at the brightness of a crowded city street. James sensed that he was still in Philadelphia, although some years had passed. The man was tall, thin, with long sandy hair hanging in lank curtains around an amiable face. He wore a grungy flannel shirt untucked over jeans with holes torn in the knees. And yet, watching him, James had the distinct impression that the man was not poor. This,

inexplicably, was the fashion of his time. This suspicion was verified as a similarly dressed young woman approached, a clutch of books in her arms and her hair matted in stiff, frizzy ropes, held down by an old kerchief.

“That thing’s not exactly earth friendly, Quinn,” the young woman commented, glancing at the cloud of dissipating blue smoke. “Where’s the bike today?”

“Packed in the backseat, along with the rest of my earthly possessions,” the man, Quinn, replied easily, leaning against the Toronado’s fender. “I’m on my way east, college bound.”

“Seems to me like you’re headed nowhere fast,” the girl sniffed. “That thing smells like roasted cat pee and looks ready to fall apart.”

The man patted the car’s bonnet affectionately. “She’ll be fine. Just needs a little oil and TLC. Besides, I can’t just leave her in Philly. She’d just get tossed into the nearest junkyard, and I can’t let that happen. She belonged to my mom, after all.”

James understood. This was Whinnie’s son, all grown up. Everyone called him Quinn-- the last name of his step-father-- but the young man secretly disliked it. He meant to move away, to New York, where his real father had gone so many years earlier. It wasn’t that he meant to find his birth father-- Quinn had never known him or heard anything from him, and had surprisingly little interest in changing that fact. It was simply that, as long as he stayed in Philadelphia, he would always remain Quinn, the son of the well-known personal injury attorney, whose face appeared on billboards all over town along with the equally well known slogan: *WHEN IT COMES TO YOUR CLAIM, QUINN WINS!*

But there was more to it even than that. Philadelphia was where his mother had been killed, over a decade ago. Quinn only barely remembered her as a sadly beautiful face and gentle, loving hands. He had hoarded everything that had once belonged to her, including the old black Toronado, but could no longer bear to stay in the city that had witnessed her death. Especially since the man who had killed her might still be living there, uncaught, walking free even to this day.

Because Quinn knew more about his mother’s death than did anyone else. He was good at figuring things out, and had had a much greater interest in the mystery than the police detectives.

Only a few summers earlier, Quinn had sought out the only witness to his mother’s death, a derelict who haunted the wharf district

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and occasionally showed up at the several homeless shelters scattered among the warehouses and liquor stores. It was at one of the soup kitchens that Quinn had finally found and interviewed him. At first, the old man had been stubbornly reluctant to talk, adamantly insisting that he had told everything there was to tell. When he realized that Quinn was the dead woman's son, however, he slowly relaxed. He admitted to Quinn that there had been another person present-- a man. The man had been the actual murderer, in fact, using a weapon unlike anything the bum had ever seen, and which he could not even describe.

"And then," the bum whispered conspiratorially, warming to the subject, his watery eyes bright and intense. "And then, when it was all over, the guy just up and... and..."

"What?" sixteen-year-old Quinn asked, trying not to grab the bum by the collar and throttle him in his impatience. "What'd he do? Tell me!"

The bum looked evasively around the nearly deserted shelter, his mouth clamped shut. When he looked back at Quinn again, his face was etched with a sort of stubborn defiance. "I'll tell you what e' did," he said in a cracked whisper. "But you won't b'lieve me. The guy up and disappeared. That's what."

Quinn simply stared at the bum's stubbly face and red, prune-like nose, and his stomach slowly sank. The bum was insane. Obviously nothing he said could be taken seriously. All of Quinn's efforts to find and interview him had been a waste of time, a total joke. Disappointment gave way to rage and Quinn almost struck the bum. His fist clenched on the cracked table top. To stop himself, he climbed brusquely from his seat and began to stalk toward the shelter's front door.

"He disappeared!" the bum called after him, abandoning secrecy, suddenly frantic to make Quinn believe him. "I didn't tell nobody 'cause they'd think I was crazy, just like you do! But it's the truth! He disappeared right out of thin air. Like some kinda magic trick!"

Quinn slammed through the shelter's door, leaving the bum raving behind him, calling after him. The old man was crazy-- totally deranged. Quinn berated himself for wasting his time, for believing there were answers to be found.

And yet, even as he raged aimlessly along the hot, crowded street, he wondered.

Was it possible the bum was telling the truth? Maybe he was not deluded, or at least not *totally* deluded. Maybe there *had* been another person there that night, a man, with some sort of inexplicable weapon, something that could kill without leaving any mark. If so...

If so, then Quinn's mother's murderer was still out there somewhere, possibly still in Philadelphia, uncaught and free, living out his days while his mother lay in a cheap grave at the edge of town, dead these many years-- dead by his detestable hand.

The idea was a poison seed in Quinn's brain, sending out roots of suspicion, blossoming into flowers of hate. For this reason, more than any other, he had decided that he would leave Philadelphia once and for all, and never look back.

"We'll miss you, Quinn," the young woman with the dreadlocks said with a sigh. "Make sure you come back and visit the old gang sometimes."

"I will," Quinn smiled, but the smile was thin. Both James and the young woman saw it. She nodded, gave Quinn a little half hug, and then walked on without looking back. Quinn watched her go, gave a brisk little sigh, and then began to walk himself, heading in the opposite direction.

Silently, James followed.

Quinn cut through a cramped alley, emerging into a much narrower street. There was no traffic here, but the noise of lorries and buses could be heard nearby, droning over the rooftops. Quinn glanced left and right, frowned to himself, and then struck off to the right, following a line of brick and glass storefronts and threadbare awnings. He finally stopped in front of a sort of market and peered into the dusty window, cupping his hands to his face to cut the glare. A row of crates beneath the window displayed an odd inventory of whisk brooms, athletic shoes, umbrellas, and cans of something called Vegemite, stacked in a haphazard pyramid.

Quinn shrugged to himself and pushed through the door, jangling a bell hung overhead.

"Hello?" he called, scanning the crowded shop for a counter. Sunbeams cut through the gloom, swimming with brilliant specks of dust and obscuring the shadowy corners. "Anyone home?"

"Morning," a voice replied faintly. "Not open yet, actually. Not that it matters. Payin' customers is always welcome."

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Quinn turned toward the voice and saw an old man behind a counter, easing himself out of an antique recliner with a groan. The area behind the counter was crammed with an enormous desk, several wooden filing cabinets, a precariously overloaded coatrack, a hot-plate and coffee maker, and what appeared to be several decades' worth of newspapers, dirty dishes, and miscellaneous inventory. An electric fan stood atop one of the file cabinets, ruffling the newspapers and playing in the old man's tufty white hair.

"Hi," Quinn said, putting a smile on his face. "Sorry. I was actually, uh..." he glanced around the store again, taking in the amazing assortment of completely unrelated merchandise. "I was actually looking for some motor oil. For my car. I..." his smile turned sheepish. "I doubt it's the sort of thing you stock here."

"Oh, I don't know," the old man replied, scratching his hunched back and adjusting his glasses. "I carry a little bit of anything and everything. Whatever I can get my hands on. It's for your car, you say?" He leaned over, producing a series of creaking pops from his spine, and began to rummage behind the counter.

"Yeah," Quinn sighed. "It's sort of old. Burns oil like crazy, but gets me there in one piece most of the time, as long as I treat her right."

"They'll do that," the man's voice wheezed from the depths of the counter. "Lessee. Oil... oil..." he reappeared, tilted his head back, and held a small can at arm's length, reading its label through his bifocals. "Three-in-one oil. That's not gonna do it, now, is it?" He smiled and laughed in a cracked voice.

"No," Quinn agreed, becoming impatient. "Maybe you could just tell me where the nearest convenience store is. I can walk. Car needs to cool down anyway."

The old man nodded knowledgeably. "Nonsense. I'm sure I've got something here. What viscosity you need?"

Quinn regretted entering the store at all. He rolled his eyes as the old man turned away, shuffling noisily around his desk. "10 W thirty. It doesn't really matter. She's an old Toronado and isn't exactly choosy. I just need to feed her something black and slippery every few dozen miles to keep her happy."

The old man stopped and peered back over his shoulder, frowning slightly. "A Toronado, you say."

Quinn nodded and endured the man's long, thoughtful gaze. "Does it matter?"

"Might," the man nodded, turning toward the counter and heaving up a hinged partition. He stepped out into the dusty sunbeams, sighing theatrically. "Touchy things, old cars like that. Burning oil is really just a symptom. Why don't you show her to me? Maybe we can fix 'er up so she don't burn so much."

Quinn frowned at the hunched old man, who merely stared back at him expectantly.

"What," he shrugged and gave another wheezy laugh. "You gonna turn down an offer of genuine goodwill? What's this town coming to? Look, I drove a Toronado myself thirty years ago. I learned a few tricks about 'em. At the very least, it'll get me out of the shop for a quarter hour. So lead on, my young friend."

Quinn almost said no, but (James saw) he had been raised to respect his elders. And besides, maybe the old guy did know a few things about cars. It would be nice not to have to pull over every forty miles amid a cloud of oily blue smoke. With a wry smile and a shake of his head, Quinn turned toward the front door.

Five minutes later, Quinn hunkered in front of the Toronado and popped the bonnet. It wrenched open with a screech and he held it up for the old man.

"Hmm," the man muttered to himself, fiddling with a few wires and plugs. He leaned over the grill and peered into the depths of the engine compartment. To Quinn, he did not appear to be a man on the verge of fixing something. On the contrary, he seemed almost to be idly hunting around, prodding this and poking at that. He sniffed the hot air over the engine, and then stood up again with a shake of his head.

"Not in there," he said, almost to himself.

"What?" Quinn asked, becoming seriously annoyed. "I thought you said you knew how to work on these?"

"Problem's not with the engine," the old man said with a brisk nod. "Has to be in the back. Open up the trunk. Let me take a look."

"The trunk." Quinn repeated sceptically, lowering the bonnet.

"That's what I said. Pop it open."

Quinn slammed the bonnet and shook his head. "Look, if it's all the same to you--"

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“You want to get this thing running again or not?” the old man said, straightening for the first time. He was, Quinn saw, rather taller than he had at first appeared. His hunched back seemed suddenly remarkably straight. His voice even sounded firmer, less wheezy, more commanding. “Open the trunk and I’ll make all your problems go away.”

Quinn glanced at the man with a mixture of bemusement and trepidation. Sighing, he shook out his keys.

“My stuff’s all back there,” he said, leading the man toward the rear of the car. “You won’t be able to see anything.”

“I’ll be able to see just fine,” the man said in a low, grating voice.

Quinn socked the key into the lock and twisted. With a pop the boot opened.

“Let me just--” he began, but the old man shouldered past him, bending low over the haphazard jumble of Quinn’s luggage and duffle bags. He began to shove them aside, patting and probing them one by one. Quinn watched this with increasing incredulity.

“Whatever the problem with the oil is,” he ventured loudly. “It isn’t in any of my bags.”

“So sure, are you?” the man growled, beginning to heave Quinn’s things out onto the street.

Quinn’s temper finally broke. “All right, that’s enough,” he said, grabbing a duffle bag with one hand and the man’s shoulder with the other. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but you’re obviously not fixing my car. Why don’t you just--”

The back of Quinn’s head connected with the light pole before he knew what happened. He dropped the duffle bag, grabbed the back of his head and slid clumsily to the sidewalk, fifteen feet away from the car.

The old man-- who suddenly didn’t appear particularly old at all-- still stood near the open boot, but peered back at Quinn with a calmly warning look.

“You’ll not want to touch me again,” he said, all the wheeze gone out of his voice. “If you know what’s best for you.”

He resumed his ransacking of the trunk, becoming agitated, muttering angrily under his breath.

Quinn climbed to his feet woozily. There was a hot, damp spot on the back of his head. He touched it gingerly with his fingers and they came away grimed with blood. The old man had pushed him. That had to have been it. But fifteen feet? Was *anyone* capable of such strength?

And yet the answer was right in front of him. The wheezy, hunched old man was suddenly straight-spined and square-shouldered, his wispy grey hair now thick and threaded with black. He heaved Quinn's guitar case out onto the street with a clatter, barely pausing.

Still feeling woozy, Quinn looked around the sunny street. People were passing, glancing idly at the man ransacking the car, but no one stopped. To the outside observer, the scene probably looked like a disgruntled father searching his son's car for some mildly illegal contraband.

Quinn stumbled off the sidewalk and into the street, making a wide angle toward the Toronado's passenger door. He reached it, thumbed the latch, and pulled the door open. A moment later, he fell inside.

"Where is it?" the man's voice seethed from the depths of the trunk behind him. "It's here! Same as before! I can *feel* it!"

Despite the morning heat, a sort of preternatural chill fell over Quinn where he sat. The man was looking for something; something he knew had to be there, something he recognized. But how could he? It was the mention of the Toronado that had done it. Not many people drove them, not anymore. That was when the old man had changed, become suddenly interested.

"Where are you," he growled, shaking the car with his fervour as he tore things out of the boot, heaving them onto the street. "Where *are* you, Gods damn it!"

And then, suddenly, he stopped. Silence fell, punctuated only by the dim thrum of distant traffic and a nearby dog's barking.

And Quinn realized that knew what the man was looking for.

He lurched in the passenger's seat, leaned over, and rammed his hand under the driver's seat, groping frantically. It wasn't there. He twisted his body, shimmying further under the seat, scrabbling in the darkness. His fingers brushed something, a small, heavy object wrapped in oily rags. He fumbled it, and then gripped it.

"What are you at, then?" a voice exclaimed harshly in his ear, and a pair of strong, knuckly hands grabbed him, clamping onto his calf and shoulder, heaving him bodily out of the car. "Eh? Where is it? Give it over!"

Quinn flailed, scrabbled at the car door to no avail, and fell stumbling into the street. The man loomed over him, a grim shadow

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against the morning sun. He reached again, but Quinn scrambled backwards, still clutching the object he'd claimed from beneath the seat. The man followed, stalking resolutely, chasing Quinn into the shadows of the opposite sidewalk. A newspaper lorry sat idling against the curb, its exhaust making a plume of rich fumes in the still air. Quinn bumped against the lorry's tire and tried to clamber to his feet.

The man kicked at him, knocking him back down.

"Give it over," he commanded, raising his chin and reaching for his back pocket. "Give it over and perhaps this day may end with you still alive."

Quinn shook his head. He groped for something to say, some pithy rebuttal that would end this incomprehensible confrontation. "O--" he stammered, clutching the wrapped object against his chest. "O- Over my dead body!"

The old man nodded firmly and sighed. "In that case..." He raised his fist from behind his back and a long, tapered stick was protruding from it. He pointed it at Quinn, sighted down it, and stepped back into the sunlight of the street, drawing his aim.

And in Quinn's hand, the wrapped object *pulsed*, suddenly as cold as a January tombstone.

"Avada..."

There was a screech, a blaring horn, a judder of grinding tires, and the man was bashed from view, replaced by a blur of grey-green metal. It was a garbage truck, slewing sideways as it braked. Quinn (and James as well) could hear the frantic cursing of the driver even over the noise of the squealing tires. A moment later-- and twenty feet away-- the garbage truck jerked to a stop, producing a rattling crash from its rubbish-choked guts.

Weak with disbelief and shock, Quinn finally clambered to his feet. He stumbled around the front of the newspaper lorry to where the garbage truck sat idling, angled crookedly toward the curb. The erstwhile old man lay in its shadow, broken and bleeding, road grime ground into his cheek and forehead. His wand was broken in his clenched fist.

"What the--" a man's voice cried, and then, shrill with disbelief: "*Him* again!"

Quinn looked up, saw the garbage truck driver standing on the running board of his truck, clutching the open door. James was not

exactly surprised to see that it was the same driver, only a decade older, his chin pouched and his cheeks grey with stubble.

“Go for help,” Quinn said mildly. “The cops, ambulance. Whatever.”

The driver looked from Quinn, to the body in the gutter, and then back again. “Whatever you say, kid,” he said, shaking his head in wonderment. “But I don’t think it’s gonna do anybody any good.” He looked back again at the dying man below and muttered, “Jeesh. Talk about what goes around comes around...”

Quinn approached the bleeding figure in the shadow of the garbage truck. As he did so, he felt the cloth fall off the object in his hand. The dying man saw it and his eyes sparkled strangely. He let out a harsh, barking laugh.

James looked. It was the ancient pistol. The one that had killed Magnussen in an alley in 1859. The one that had somehow travelled through time, passing from one hand to another, to end up here, at this moment. Quinn looked down at it in his hand.

“This is what you wanted,” he said blankly. “But... why?”

The man’s face contorted with pain and rage. “It’s... more power than a creature like you--” He coughed violently and spat blood. “Than a creature like you knows what to do with.”

Quinn took another step forward and stood over the man. He lowered the old, unloaded pistol to his side. “You murdered my mother,” he said, merely confirming what he already knew.

The man showed his bloody teeth and struggled for his last, ragged breath. “Killing Muggles,” he rasped, “isn’t... murder.”

He fell back against the curb, his strength spent. A moment later, his chest fell and didn’t rise again. He still stared up at Quinn, but the eyes were as empty as marbles.

Quinn stared down at him. It was over, but it wasn’t satisfying. James could see it on the young man’s face. Quinn didn’t have any more answers. Just more questions. It was as if he was willing the dead man to come back to life again, to ask him the questions that now, suddenly, seemed so important.

Why was the gun-- this ancient, useless old revolver-- worth killing for? What had he meant by it having more power than he, Quinn, would know what to do with? What had the stick in the man’s hand

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been? Was that how he had killed Quinn's mother somehow, all those years earlier?

So many questions, and almost no answers.

Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime (but was really less than fifteen seconds) Quinn bent, retrieved the hank of oily cloth from the pavement, and wrapped the pistol in it. He returned to his Toronado, pushed the wrapped weapon back under the driver's seat, and then went back to the body of his mother's murderer. Calmly, he sat down on the curb and just stared at the dead man's blank, marble-like eyes. There he waited for the police, whose sirens were even now echoing along the street.

And James sank away, leaving Quinn, watching the young man's strange, inquiring calm, wishing he could answer the questions for him.

The pistol was powerful because it had ended the life of a great, dark wizard, and that had made it a sort of wand, absorbing the wizard's power, converting it into strange, magical energy. It was inexplicable, but it was also undeniable.

Somehow, some way (James thought as darkness drifted over him, engulfing the scene) this was the answer. This strange, long story was the answer to his most pressing question.

And as James tumbled into the darkness of the dream's closing oblivion, he realized: Quinn wasn't the only one with more questions than answers.





12. MYSTERY AT THE WHITE TOMB

James ascended to wakefulness like a diver ascending from the depths of the ocean. It seemed to take an exceedingly long time, with consciousness blooming slowly above like a pale dawn. Eventually, blearily, he opened his eyes.

He was not on the Hogwarts Express. A blank, grey ceiling hung high over his head, dim with shadows. He turned, moaning, and pushed himself to a sitting position.

“Oh thank goodness,” a woman’s voice announced, her tone somewhere between relief and rebuke. “I was beginning to think you’d spend the rest of the term on that bed. Here, here, drink this. You must be hopelessly dehydrated.”

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A glass vial was pressed against James' lips, followed by a gush of cold liquid. He gulped the liquid-- which tasted a bit like old copper knuts and dirty socks-- and coughed.

"Now let's not be dramatic," Madame Curio chided, setting the glass aside. "Anyone willing to swallow five of those horrible Weasley Fainting Fancies on a dare should have no problem with a little Draught of Rejuvenation."

"F-Fainting--" James coughed, glancing around. He saw that he was back at Hogwarts, in the hospital wing. The light outside the tall windows was grey and watery, giving no indication of the time of day. "Fainting Fancies?"

"You of all people should know better, Mr. Potter," Madame Curio huffed. "Taking dares about such silly things, especially on the train, with no medical staff to assist if things go awry. And things do always seem to go awry with you, don't they? Fortunately for you, Rose Weasley, Ralph Deedle and that Malfoy boy had the sense to bring you straight to me from the train, telling me exactly what happened."

James' heart sank in his chest. "They carried me here from the train? Like, in front of everybody?"

"Well there was little they could do to hide it, was there?" Madame Curio replied, producing a thermometer and thrusting it into James' mouth.

He flopped back against the rumpled pillows. "How long have we been back, then?" he mumbled around the thermometer.

"Three and a half days," Madame Curio sniffed. "I was seriously beginning to wonder if I was going to have to transfer you to St. Mungos."

"Three days!?" James nearly choked again, scrambling upright. Madame Curio pushed him back down.

"Yes, three days, so you can manage five more minutes. Now lie still and stop talking."

When Madame Curio finally released him, James made his way toward the Great Hall, where he could hear the dull thrum and clatter of dinner conversation. He tried to enter surreptitiously, angling around the side wall toward the Gryffindor table, but nonetheless drew an increasing number of glances and half-whispered comments. As James passed, Lance Vassar smirked and shook his head, joined by his constant entourage of admirers. From the Slytherin table, Albus craned, and began to applaud.

This was joined by a smattering of others throughout the hall, all grinning, some miming fainting, hands to their foreheads.

“Hilarious,” James huffed, dropping to a seat between Rose and Scorpius. “Fainting Fancies.”

“What were we supposed to do?” Rose hissed. “It was like you were dead! By the time we got to Hogsmeade I’d tried every reviving charm I know. We couldn’t tell anyone about the Dream Inducers, could we?”

“The Fainting Fancies were Scorpius’ idea,” Ralph said, pushing a platter of steak and kidney pie at James. “When we told him what happened, he came up with that straight away, even had a few of them in his pocket to make it all seem legit. Did the job nicely when we got to Madame Curio.”

James accepted the platter, suddenly realizing just how ravenous he was. “Except that now everyone thinks I’m some prat who’ll swallow anything on a dare.”

“Better that than having Professor Avior knowing you nicked some of his wares,” Rose said in a low voice. “By the way, glad you finally woke up.”

“So tell,” Scorpius said seriously, pushing aside his own plate and leaning close. “Apparently the Yuxa Baslatma worked, yes? We’ve been waiting half a week to hear the mysterious answer to our problems. What did you see?”

James met Scorpius’ eyes, then drew a deep breath, unsure where to start. He nodded, and then shook his head. “It worked. But I don’t have any clue what any of it meant.”

“Tell,” Rose insisted. “Maybe we can help work it out.”

James shook his head firmly, as if to dislodge something in his brain. “Let me eat. And think a bit. I still feel like there’s a cloud jammed into my head. Then we’ll discuss it. In the library.”

The others agreed to this reluctantly. Eventually, after James’ third helping of steak and kidney pie (and Ralph’s fourth pumpkin muffin) they made their way to the library, where James told them everything he could remember. When he finished, there was a moment of thoughtful silence.

“How’s that an answer to our most important question?” Ralph finally asked.

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Rose frowned. "It does seem pretty vague. Perhaps it will make sense eventually?"

"Who's Quinn?" Scorpius mused, leaning back in his chair. "That's really the key to everything."

"Quincy is one of the names the Collector is using as the new American vice president," Scorpius suggested doubtfully.

James sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I wish it was that easy. The Quinn in my dream had it as a last name, and he stopped using it as soon as he moved away from Philadelphia. Who knows what name he's going by now? All I know is that all of this started because of what happened when Zane, Ralph and I went through the timelock and followed Magnussen."

"I *told* you it was dangerous meddling about in time!" Rose rallied, poking James in the chest. "I warned you! That's why Time Turners have been outlawed! The past is no place to go mucking about in!"

"Cool your cauldron, Weasley," Scorpius drawled in a bored voice. "Clumsy as they probably were, James, Deedle and Walker didn't change anything. They just watched it all happen from behind a bunch of crates. Like mice."

"Well," Ralph, objected mildly. "Not like mice, exactly. More like... like lemurs."

"Foxes," James amended. "Stealthy like."

"You can't know you didn't change things," Rose insisted seriously. "It's a scientific law: observing things changes the outcome. Even the Muggles know that."

Ralph blinked at Rose. "Where do you get this stuff?"

Rose flopped backwards in her chair and crossed her arms huffily. "Just because you haven't read it doesn't mean it isn't true."

"So what did I miss here in the land of the living?" James asked tiredly. For someone who had slept for almost four days, he felt surprisingly exhausted.

"Nothing good," Ralph admitted in a low voice. "Professor Revalvier isn't the only good teacher whose been replaced by some dodgy Ministry hack. Tabitha Corsica has taken over for Professor Longbottom in Herbology, just like we heard last time we were at Yorke. Grudje apparently arranged it himself."

“She’s actually not a bad teacher, really.” Rose sniffed. “I mean, she’s a despicable person and all, sure, but still...”

James rolled his eyes, dreading the prospect of sitting beneath that cool, pretty, hateful gaze next Herbology. “I don’t care how good a teacher she’s pretending to be. She’s vicious and mad. And besides, nobody knows more about Herbology than Professor Longbottom.”

Nobody argued with that.

“That’s just the start, though,” Rose went on, “Filch is running more rampant than ever, haunting the halls at all hours with that cane of his, just looking for people to sock with detention. He’s filling up the Charms classroom most nights with his victims, making them scrub old trophies, do lines, or worse.”

“What’s worse than doing lines with those bloody black quills?” James frowned, remembering the cuts on the back of his sister’s hand, his temper rising.

“Oh, he doesn’t use those in public,” Ralph answered. “Those are for special offenders who have to do detention down in his office. Nobody is allowed to talk about it, but we all know that’s what happens there.”

“Argus Filch is a sadist,” Scorpius said simply. “He likes hurting people, but he gets bored with the same things over and over. To keep it enjoyable he has to get... inventive.”

“He makes students levitate their textbooks.” Rose whispered.

James blinked. “Well. That doesn’t sound so--”

“For hours at a time,” Ralph added. “Have you ever tried that? It’s easy for the first few minutes, sure. But eventually your arm gets tired, so tired it hurts. And your concentration weakens.”

“And if you drop the book,” Scorpius said, “it falls into a cauldron of acid, destroying it. You’re out a textbook and Filch just laughs, clucking his tongue and talking about how wasteful it is, and how your ‘mummy and daddy’ will soon run out of money to replace your books. And then he just makes you start over with another one from your school bag.”

“Who’s he doing this to?” James asked, his cheeks reddening. “Has he done it to Lily?”

“Lily is keeping herself out of trouble,” Rose soothed. “But Scorpius has first-hand experience. He spent three hours levitating his books.”

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“Only dropped one,” Ralph nodded, impressed.

“Fortunately my family can afford all the books I need,” Scorpius said with a wave of his hand. “And my father approves of harsh punishments. He thinks it will ‘put the Slytherin back in me.’”

A shadow passed over the table and James felt someone standing behind him. He glanced up and was chilled by the sight of Filch himself, suddenly looming over him, a grim, self-satisfied smile creasing his wrinkled face.

“Doing homework are we?” he asked in a low, grating voice.

“Yes,” Ralph answered loudly, at exactly the same time that Rose said, “No.” She glared at Ralph, and then glanced back at the caretaker.

“We’re finished, sir. We... *were* doing homework. Now we’re just... er, talking.”

Filch raised his stubbly chin, his eyes sparkling meanly. “Strange that I see no books. Difficult to do homework without books. Or quills. Or *parchment*.”

James tried not to wilt in Filch’s long shadow. He could smell cold and mustiness on the man’s worn leather coat. “We’re discussing a class project, sir. Something for, er, Muggle Studies.” This seemed safe enough, as Muggle Studies did not, this term, require any books.

Filch glared down at James for a long moment, his eyes narrowed, his mouth cinched up on one side, consideringly. “Talking’s for common rooms,” he finally said in a low, grating voice. “The library is for quiet.”

Scorpius cleared his throat loudly, drawing attention away from James. “Right you are sir. If you will excuse us, then, we’ll just be on our way. Won’t we?”

He climbed to his feet and straightened his robes. James, Rose and Ralph followed suit. Filch did not move.

“Enjoy your nice long nap, Mr. Potter?” he asked pointedly.

James felt the heat rise to his cheeks again and knew they were burning red. Angry retorts crowded into his mind, clamouring to be spoken. Instead, he glanced away, toward the distant librarian’s desk, and merely said, “Is sleeping against the rules, sir?”

Filch’s smile widened, showing his yellow teeth. “It may well be. You’ve missed several days’ classes, Mr. Potter. Your professors mind such things. I, however, do not. *I* mind that you are a foolish, stupid boy who seems to attract trouble the way rotten food attracts flies.”

James felt the anger welling up in him, nearly bursting forth. And then he realized something: Filch was *trying* to anger him. The caretaker was hoping to provoke a reason to give James detention. And it had almost worked. Realizing this, the rage slowly subsided. He glanced up at Filch thoughtfully.

“Enjoying my father’s cloak, Mr. Filch?” he asked, looking the old man square in the eye. “He knows that you have it, you know.”

Filch’s smile dried up in an instant. “That cloak was confiscated,” he growled peevishly. “All very nice and legal. If your father dislikes it, he can take it up with the headmaster, and I would very much like to see him try. In the meantime, I suggest you keep your cheeky comments to yourself.”

With that, he took a step backward, allowing James room to move around him. Tentatively, the four students trickled away, heading toward the door, expecting Filch to call them back at any moment. He did not, but he watched them beadily, angrily.

“That was really stupid, James,” Rose said quietly as they climbed the stairs. “Brave, but stupid.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Scorpius countered. “It was bloody brilliant. Besides, what’s the worst he can do?”

James considered this for a moment, unsure if the answer was particularly comforting. “So what did you do to get detention anyway?” he asked as they neared the portrait hole.

“A trifle,” Scorpius replied in a bored voice, then, to the portrait of the Fat Lady. “Flitterbloom.”

The Fat Lady nodded and swung aside in her frame, revealing the entrance to the common room. Scorpius climbed through.

Rose turned to James before following Scorpius. “He took the blame for the Fainting Fancies dare,” she explained. “Said he told you you were a Flobberworm if you refused. That’s why he got detention.”

James blinked at her, and then glanced through the portrait hole, watching Scorpius hurl himself into a saggy chair by the hearth. He didn’t know what to say.

“Let’s just hope,” Rose sighed, turning to clamber through the hole herself. “That that dream of yours ends up being worth it.”



The following weeks went by in a sort of hectic blur. James quickly learned that both the new Wizlit professor, Herbetina Blovius, and Herbology's Tabitha Corsica had taken to assigning crippling amounts of homework. James, having missed most of his first week back, found himself immediately buried under a seemingly insurmountable pile of essays, worksheets and literature assignments. Fortunately, Rose was able to assist with the latter, having already read most of the books on Blovius' reading list and providing James with a quick verbal synopsis of each.

"All except for Persephone Remora's vampire trilogy," she sniffed with obvious distaste. "I mean honestly. How many adjectives can someone pile up before the whole sentence just collapses under its own weight?"

The general theory among Scorpius, Rose and Ralph was that the teachers were under strict orders to keep their students as busy as possible as a sort of distraction. This was indirectly confirmed by Professor Votary at the end of one of his accidentally exciting Ancient Runes lectures.

"As you are aware, students, I traditionally eschew the assignment of homework," he sighed impatiently, gazing fixedly at an upper corner of the classroom, "since I believe it is an archaic and ineffective measure of academic progress, remnant of a time when scholarship was judged by mere repetition of facts rather than application of experience. However, in light of new imperatives instituted by current leadership..." He adjusted his tiny spectacles and seemed to give the matter a moment's disgruntled consideration. "Six inches of parchment on the similarities between Babylonian cuneiform and ancient Hexaphonics should suffice."

This was, of course, met with a chorus of weary moans, since Hexaphonics were among the most notoriously complicated magical runes ever devised.

“You guys are right,” Zane whispered, slinging his backpack over his shoulder as the class shuffled muttering toward the door. “This has got to be Grudje’s work. He’s keeping everybody too busy to ask any awkward questions.”

“Filch, too,” Ralph glowered. “Since not handing in homework is now a punishable offense.”

Zane gave a low whistle. “Lucky for me he’s got no jurisdiction over us Alerons.”

“I feel worse for those poor Yorke students,” Rose said, glancing over her shoulder toward Morton Comstock and his Muggle companions. “They don’t even have the resources to study such things. Not to mention the fact that most Hexaphonics are invisible to Muggles.”

“I wish they were invisible to me, too,” James countered grumpily. “Just looking at them gives me a headache. The way they crawl all over the page. It’s like trying to read an anthill.”

Water dripped steadily from the roofs and gutters of the castle as winter receded, revealing dark patches of muddy grass like islands in the slushy snow. Soon enough, the trees of the Forbidden Forest budded with green and stiff spring winds tore across the grounds, raising leaden waves on the lake and snapping students’ cloaks and robes as they made their way in huddled clusters to the greenhouses.

Tabitha Corsica, however, never seemed even slightly ruffled, regardless of the weather. She presided over Herbology class with her typical infuriating smugness, showing special favour to her former house (Slytherins were always granted the care of the flowering *Perfunia* bushes while the rest were responsible for the maintenance of *Mandrakes* and *Thorned Pus-Tubers*). Like Professor Blovius, Corsica prescribed endless essays and reading assignments. It was common knowledge, however, that she provided her Slytherin housemates with extra-curricular assistance, up to and including (or so the rumours went) dummy essays, posted in the Slytherin common room under the guise of ‘study aids’, that they were allowed to simply copy.

“And they don’t even have to go to the effort of copying them down by hand!” Graham Warton insisted as he, Ralph, Rose and James squelched back from the greenhouses one particularly blustery day. “Mei

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Isis heard from Ashley Doone that she saw Beetlebrick laughing about it in the library. Corsica's taught them all the Duplicitus spell!"

Ralph frowned into the wind. "What's the Duplicitus spell?"

"That's ridiculous," Rose shook her head peevishly. "That's advanced N.E.W.T. level transfiguration. Believe me, I've tried it."

Ralph glanced from Rose to James, his brow furrowed.

"It's a copying spell," James shrugged. "Transfigures one thing into an exact copy of another. But you have to be touching the thing you want to copy, and it's supposed to be dead difficult."

"Difficult or not," Graham scoffed, heaving open the castle door and ducking out of the damp wind. "Corsica's teaching her Slytherin pets a lot more than Herbology, I'll tell you that."

As spring finally warmed the air and coaxed the grounds into a lush green patchwork, Quidditch matches progressed from icy tests of endurance to mere frustrating disappointments. Lance Vassar's performance as Gryffindor Seeker was not improved by the warmer weather, and this was even beginning to take its toll on Professor McGonagall, whose love of the game and pride of house were legendary. As firework spells erupted from the new scoreboard in celebration of a Hufflepuff victory, James could hear her angry muttering even over the noise of the cheering Hufflepuffs.

"It's one thing to be a good sport," she grouched under her breath. "It's another thing entirely to serve victory on a ruddy silver platter."

"What's that professor?" Deirdre Finnegan asked loudly, craning to look back at McGonagall from the front row of the Gryffindor grandstand.

"I said good match," McGonagall called tersely, arising from her seat in a swirl of tartan robes. "And I'll thank you to keep your ears to yourself."

"Look at him," Graham shook his head. "No new scoreboard is worth that."

James sighed as Lance Vassar circled high over the pitch, his right arm raised in a lazy wave. Hovering in front of the goal rings on the far side of the pitch, Devindar Das pressed a hand to his forehead in weary defeat. Heth Thomas and Willow Wisteria, Gryffindor's beaters, both watched Vassar with tight frowns, their Beater bats dangling at their sides.

Rose shook her head. "He doesn't love Quidditch. He just loves being seen. I don't think he's even broken a sweat!"

"This is all your fault, James," Deirdre seethed. "That should be *you* out there. Not that arrogant little git."

"True," Scorpius lamented breezily. "James would at least lose with the proper dejected shame. He's had more practice at it, after all."

Rose cuffed Scorpius on the back of the head as they stood.

Fortunately for everyone, the international exchange classes provided a welcome relief from the burden of homework. Since most of the exchange classes counted simply as credit for Muggle Studies, students were technically exempted from in-class assignments, although participation was "strongly encouraged" by Professor Curry, who occasionally sat in on the international classes to judge student performance and involvement. The day she visited James' and Ralph's Theoretical Arithmetics class at Beauxbatons, however, she seemed as baffled as James himself by the enormous abaci and the busy clickety-clack of their coloured beads.

"Mr. Potter," she said quietly, sidling up to James. "Who is the teacher of this class?"

James shook his head. "Couldn't say, Professor. We've been at this for months now and I've never seen anyone that I could say for sure was actually teaching anything."

Professor Curry nodded uncertainly. "A practical class, then," she said. "Practicing... er..."

"Quadrant A dash eight resolved," Morton Comstock announced proudly, stepping back from his abacus and flexing his fingers. "That's a new record."

An older Beauxbatons girl with long black hair glanced up sharply. "Accounting for the temporal distortions from Ursa Major?" she asked with the faintest of French accents.

"Of course," Comstock smiled. "Give me a challenge."

"You shall have it," the dark-haired girl nodded briskly. "Join Miss Durand and Mr. Fournier on the constellations grid, s'il vous plaît."

"Moving up to the big time, eh, Potter?" Comstock grinned, nudging James with his elbow as he edged past.

Professor Curry watched him join two blue-robed students at the front of the gilded and mirrored room. "That boy is from Yorke, is he not?" she asked, trying to keep the incredulity out of her voice.

Ralph nodded. "He's... got unique skills."

James Potter and the Morrigan Web

In the front of the room, Comstock's voice echoed loudly. "It's the perimeter mapping level from Cosmic Commando all over again. I defeated that in three hours flat. This should be a piece of cake."

"Is he..." Curry frowned, "Is he some sort of... space explorer? Do Muggles allow their children to do such things?"

Ralph stifled an uncharacteristic chuckle. "He plays games, Professor."

Curry nodded, still watching Comstock with her brow furrowed. "Fascinating! Is this a prized talent in the Muggle community?"

"Hah!" a girl's voice scoffed nearby. James glanced aside and saw Comstock's Yorke classmate, Lucia Gruberova, her brown hair done up in her usual spritely pony tail. She glanced at James and quickly smoothed the derision out of her face before dropping her eyes. "Video games are all right, I guess," she said to the floor. "But not as good as books, if you ask me."

James nodded. He wasn't sure he agreed (he'd never played a Muggle video game in his life), but he appreciated that she, like him, seemed to have no love for Morton Comstock.

Wednesday's Practical Prophecy classes at Durmstrang had taken on a distinctly different tone in the absence of Zane, mostly because Nastasia had assumed his place. This provided James a gamut of mixed feelings, ranging from confused annoyance to grudging admiration, since, despite her brash Americanness and her day-glow hair, she seemed to have gotten herself into surprisingly good graces with Professor Avior. James remembered that she had predicted this, as the professor was obviously preoccupied with magical bloodlines, and she herself came from a long line of pureblood American wizardry. Still, both Ralph and James were consistently surprised to see the hauntingly familiar professor inviting the slight, precocious girl to the front of the classroom to assist with mundane class duties or illustrate acts of divination-- all of which Nastasia was quite good at.

"I never would have guessed it," Ralph whispered behind his hand one day as Nastasia used her wand to coax a smoke vision into life over a bright purple candle. "But she's, like, totally talented, isn't she?"

James nodded, and then shook his head in wonderment. Nastasia was definitely complicated. In light of their midnight conversation in the Gryffindor common room-- at the end of which she had inexplicably kissed him-- no one knew better than he just how complicated she was.

As he thought this, she met his eyes through the ribbons of enchanted smoke that she had conjured. There was a hard glint in her gaze. She winked at him briefly.

“Excellent, excellent,” Professor Avior complimented, snuffing the candle with a flick of his wand. “We have mere minutes before the smoke vision loses its potency. All of you will see something different, but every interpretation should be reliable so long as you apply the Eight Prophetic Principles that we have discussed. Please record your divinations now, and do be quick. Ms. Hendricks is, of course, exempt.” He patted her lightly on the shoulder as he passed, beginning a slow circuit of the classroom. Quills immediately began to scratch on parchment, bobbing furiously over the shoulder of each student.

James peered at the ribbons of smoke, attempting to divine something from them, but all he could see was Nastasia staring unabashedly back at him through the smoke, her bright eyes watching him, her lips curled in a secret smile.

Would she kiss him again with those lips?

Did he want her to?

He was dismayed that the answers to those questions were far from obvious. His insides seemed to lift at the thought, and then drop precipitously a moment later. It was all so complicated and confusing. He certainly didn’t love her. He hardly even liked her. And yet...

He tore his eyes away from her strangely penetrating stare and her secret little smile. Glancing down, he saw that his quill was pressed to the parchment hard enough to form a tiny bubble of black ink. No visions came to his mind, despite Avior’s lecture on the Eight Prophetic Principles.

“Is your *mind a blank*, Mr. Potter?” Professor Avior asked in a low voice.

James glanced up guiltily. The professor stood next to him, his bushy white eyebrows raised inquisitively over his half-moon spectacles, and for a moment James forgot that this was not, in fact, the long-dead Albus Dumbledore.

“I--” he began, and then dropped his gaze again. “I can’t--”

“Prophetic Principle number five, Mr. Potter,” the Professor said quietly, reassuringly. “Empty your mind of expectations. You are half-way there. Don’t see what you expect to see. See only what is there.”

James Potter and the Morrigan Web

James nodded, still staring hard at his blank parchment. He waited. A moment later he sensed the Professor drifting away, continuing his circuit about the classroom. James glanced surreptitiously back at him. He didn't just look like Dumbledore. Somehow, some way, he *was* Dumbledore.

Don't see what you expect to see... see only what is there...

That, James thought darkly, is much easier said than done.

As the traditional spring Hogsmeade weekend approached, a rumour spread among the student populace that headmaster Grudje intended to cancel it, citing security concerns. James found the possibility of such a ban extremely likely, considering the fact that both incoming and outgoing school post was still being screened by the Headmaster and his trusted inner circle. On the Friday before Hogsmeade weekend, tensions were running very high in the Great Hall as students awaited some announcement from the head table. It would be just like Headmaster Grudje, James thought, to wait until the final moment to dash everyone's hopes.

When the headmaster did finally stand and approach the podium, there was no need for him to call the dinner assembly to attention. Every eye had already turned toward him, and the tense thrum of conversation died away to expectant silence.

Grudje surveyed the room with his expressionless grey eyes. "As you know," he began, speaking slowly and with patient emphasis. "In light of current international tensions between the wizarding and Muggle communities, we have been forced to institute some unfortunate changes to the normal freedoms we have enjoyed within these walls."

"Here it comes," Scorpius muttered, rolling his eyes.

"Let me assure you," Grudje went on, raising his voice over a wave of mutinous muttering. "No one regrets these changes more than we, your teachers and administrators. Mr. Filch, especially, has repeatedly expressed his most heartfelt wish for a return to simpler, bygone days."

James glanced toward the rear of the Great Hall, where Filch stood with Mrs. Norris cradled in the crook of his arm, his cursed cane clutched in his right fist. A tight smile creased his sallow face.

"The only simpler time he wants to return to," Rose muttered boldly, "is the time when he didn't have to hide his tortures under a thin pretence of punishment."

This statement was met with a chorus of harsh, disgruntled whispers, echoing the noises coming from each of the other tables.

“However,” Grudje continued, and then paused, cocking his narrow head slightly and narrowing his eyes. “I do believe it is customary to show the respect of silence when the headmaster is speaking. Or am I mistaken, Mr. Filch?”

This last was addressed to the rear of the Hall, where Filch stood watching.

“Taking mental notes as needed, Headmaster,” Filch replied in his cracked, wheezing voice. He swept his gaze meaningfully over the house tables, quelling the chorus of whispers and mutterings. In their wake, the entire room rang with a sort of mute, electric anger.

“However,” Grudje said again, lowering his voice to a gravelly monotone. “We are not utterly without compassion. Hogsmeade weekends provide a healthy outlet for youthful vigour. One that we, your guardians, would be loath to forbid. As a result, we have determined to allow the tradition to continue as usual.”

A palpable sense of relief flooded the hall. James glanced at Rose, his eyebrows raised in surprise. Grudje, however, was not finished.

“We will, nonetheless,” he said, raising one pale, knuckly hand, “institute certain... *reasonable requirements*. For instance, only students with no current or scheduled detentions may enjoy the privilege of Hogsmeade weekends.”

Around the room, a scattering of shoulders slumped and brows furrowed. There were, of course, a large number of students currently scheduled for detentions.

“Furthermore,” Grudje went on, “We would hate to see any of you fall behind in your studies. Therefore, only students who are current on all homework assignments, including those due the following Monday, will be eligible for the trip to Hogsmeade.”

Another wave of angry mutterings washed over the room at this, even louder than before. This time, Grudje seemed to allow it. He smiled slowly, indulgently.

“Professors will be stationed in the courtyard tomorrow morning, ready to accept any outstanding homework assignments and bid you a good trip. Until then, do enjoy your evening, students,” he said, spreading his arms in a display of gracious magnanimity.

James Potter and the Morrigan Web

Graham Warton leaned over the table furiously. “He knows Corsica slapped us with a fourteen inch essay on the uses of Hazel and Helledore! There’s no way we can have that done by tomorrow morning!”

“He’s setting us up!” Deirdre Finnegan agreed hopelessly. “Between detentions and homework, there’s no way any of us can go to Hogsmeade.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Scorpius mused, glancing back at the Slytherin table. “None of *them* look particularly unhappy, do they?”

James followed Scorpius’ gaze and saw that it was true. Ralph, Trenton Bloch and Albus sat near the head of the table, their heads together in hushed conversation. Along the rest of the Slytherin table, however students were grinning, talking animatedly, even offering each other congratulatory nods and back slaps.

“Looks like it’s true that Professor Corsica is giving her house a little ‘helping hand’ with their Herbology assignments,” Scorpius sighed.

“I *told* you!” Graham exclaimed. “We should tell McGonagall!”

Rose shook her head derisively. “Don’t be an idiot. We don’t have any proof. Even if she believed us, Tabitha would just deny it, turning that infuriating charm of hers up to full power.” Here, Rose sat up straight, widened her eyes in a parody of wounded innocence and adopted a tone of oily sweetness, “Why Professor McGonagall, I *would never* endanger the academic development of my students by providing them with answers. That would be *unethical!*”

Deirdre snorted despite herself. “That’s totally what Corsica would say. And the thing is, everyone would know she was lying.”

“Just like everyone would know there was no way to prove it,” Scorpius added.

“Maybe we’re looking at this all wrong,” James said, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully as he gazed across the Great Hall.

“I don’t see how,” Graham grouched. “No fourteen inch Herbology essay, no Hogsmeade. You have another way of looking at it?”

“Have you ever heard the phrase,” James asked, a rueful smile breaking on his face, “‘if you can’t beat them, join them?’”



The next morning, James, Scorpius and Rose shuffled into the rather short queue of students lining up in the courtyard.

“She’s totally going to know what we did,” James muttered.

Several places ahead of them, Albus glanced back pointedly, his brow lowered.

“Who cares if she knows,” Scorpius shrugged. “What can she do about it? If she accepts the essays from Albus and Ralph, she’ll have to accept them from us, even if she knows we somehow winkled them.”

“She’ll know it was Albus,” Rose murmured tensely. “Ralph says she refused to teach him the Duplicitus spell. My guess is that she’s still peeved at him from their first year, when he turned on her and her stupid Progressive Element cronies.”

“Deedle probably couldn’t work the Duplicitus spell even if she did teach him,” Scorpius commented. “With that hulking wand of his, he’d probably duplicate the entire castle right on top of us all.”

Rose stamped her foot angrily. “Oh, I can’t believe I let you talk me into this!” she hissed. “I’ve never cheated before in my entire life. I feel so *filthy!*”

James nudged her. “Let it go, already. It’s not cheating if Corsica is allowing her own house to do it. We’re just... you know... levelling the playing field.”

“Just because cheating is second nature to *you!*” Rose seethed. “I should have given my copy to Graham. He was right furious we couldn’t get him one.”

Scorpius shushed both of them as Albus stepped forward to meet Tabitha Corsica. She smiled at him from behind a pair of stylish tortoiseshell sunglasses and held out her hand. He placed a roll of parchment into it and glanced back at James again, his face pinched in anger.

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Corsica nodded at Albus without opening the parchment. He hunched his shoulders and stumped ahead, joining Ralph by the courtyard gate.

“This is it,” Rose whined in a shrill whisper. “I can’t do this! It’s embarrassing! It’s not worth it!”

“Ms. Weasley?” Corsica called lightly. “You have something for me?”

Rose hesitated, glancing back at James with a look of agonized indecision. Finally, she stalked forward and stabbed out her fist, handing Corsica a roll of parchment.

“Very nice, Ms. Weasley. You always were a quick study,” Corsica admitted, her sunglasses glinting in the sunlight. In a lower voice, she added, “How nice you’ve found a way to compensate for the challenges of your heritage.”

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?” Rose demanded.

“Nothing,” James blurted out, anxious to get the affair over and avoid confrontation. “I think I’m next, Professor.”

Corsica turned to him and her pleasant smile fell away. “James Potter?” she said suspiciously. “What are you...?” She glanced suddenly back at Rose. “This is very unbecoming of you, Ms. Weasley, assisting others in this fashion.”

“Oh, does that sort of thing *offend* you, Professor?” Rose asked archly. “I wouldn’t have guessed.”

Corsica’s expression hardened. “I’ll have you before Mr. Filch in a heartbeat, my dear,” she growled.

Rose grinned viciously. “Maybe you should take a look at James’ essay before you do that, *Professor*.”

Corsica paused, her neat eyebrows lowering behind her sunglasses. She turned back to James and held out her hand. James stepped forward nervously and placed his parchment onto her palm. Without looking away from him, she ripped off the wax seal and unrolled it. Only then did she glance down at it, and freeze.

“What do you think, Professor,” Rose asked sweetly. “Should we go talk to Mr. Filch? Perhaps we should suggest he take a look at *all* of the essays that have been handed in so far.”

Corsica slowly rerolled the parchment, her face carefully expressionless. She glared at Rose for a long, thoughtful moment. To Rose’s credit, she did not flinch from that gaze; in fact, she returned it.

“Enjoy your day, students,” Corsica said suddenly, brightly. “And congratulations on your... *resourcefulness*.”

“Thanks, Professor,” Scorpius replied easily, handing her his copy of the essay with a slight bow. Rose didn’t seem prepared to let the matter go, however. James grabbed her by the elbow and began to tug her toward the gates. Rose followed reluctantly. Just inside the gate, she stopped and whirled back.

“By the way, Professor,” she called out. “In the second paragraph, Hellebore is *not* used for making the Elixir of Harmony. That would be the Draught of Peace. I assume you’ll grade ‘my’ essay accordingly.”

Corsica’s face paled despite the streaming sunlight. She seemed to gather herself for a retort, drawing up to her full height. Before she could, however, James dragged Rose around the edge of the gate. They joined Albus, Ralph and Scorpius as they darted onto the path toward Hogsmeade.

“Corsica’s totally going to kill me,” Albus raged as they ran. “Now hand it over.”

James nodded and dug in his jeans pocket, producing a folded envelope, addressed to their parents. Albus took it, examined it critically for a moment, and then brandished his wand. With a flourish, he tapped the envelope and made it vanish in a puff of fiery ash.

“If you *ever* threaten to tell mum and dad how that grindylow got into their laundry hamper again, I swear I’ll make ten copies of *myself* and pound you into next year.”

“Forget that,” James panted, glancing aside at Rose as she fumed. “After what she said to Corsica back there, *she’s* the only one whose bad side I’m worried about getting on.”



James Potter and the Murrigan Web

After the stresses, misadventures, and painfully unanswered questions of the previous few months, that day in Hogsmeade was a blissfully welcome respite.

James, Ralph, Albus, Scorpius and Rose spent the entire morning leisurely browsing the shops lining the High Street, including stopovers in Gladrags (where Ralph purchased a new spring cloak with Christmas money he'd received from his grandmother on his deceased mother's side), Dervish & Banges, where they spent many awed minutes examining the new Thunderstreak Limited, which (according to the flashing sign in the window) came equipped with its own anti-inertia charms and slipstream enchantment, and Scrivenshafts, where James, Scorpius and Albus finally got bored waiting for Rose and Ralph, abandoning them in front of a display of self-inking quills while they stole across the street to Honeydukes. Half an hour later, pockets bulging with Fizzing Whizzbees, Jelly Slugs, and Pepper Imps, the five-some made their way to the Three Broomsticks for a late lunch. There, they ran into a gaggle of Slytherins clustered raucously around a large table. Several Slytherin girls glared suspiciously at Ralph and Albus.

"Gwynn and Chlorissa," Ralph moaned, trying rather pathetically to hide behind James. "They totally hate me."

"They don't hate you, Ralph," Albus said reassuringly. "They just think you're a big dumb oaf and a traitor to your magical heritage. That's all."

"That's loads better," Ralph sighed, trying to hide his face behind the collar of his new cloak.

Albus waved heartily at the table of Slytherins. "Hey everybody! Just slumming it with the brother and cousin Weasley. You can pick your friends, but you're stuck with the family you're dealt, right?"

Most of the Slytherins seemed to relax at this, their suspicious glares melting into crooked smiles. Albus ducked toward their table and threw an arm each over the shoulders of Beetlebrick and the tall girl called Chlorissa. He whispered something to them. As he did, the Slytherins glanced furtively back at James, Rose and Scorpius where they gathered near the bar.

"What'd you tell them?" Ralph asked as Albus returned.

"I told them you were building up confidences so James and Scorpius here would let slip with the Gryffindor Quidditch playbook for

next match. Not that it matters,” he added, elbowing James in the ribs. “You lot are about as threatening as a sack of dead Horklumps, what with that git Vassar chasing the Snitch.”

As the sun began to lower and gusty winds pushed a low blanket of clouds overhead, dimming the streets and cooling the air, James, Rose and Scorpius parted from Albus and Ralph (who prudently decided to rejoin their Slytherin fellows). Reluctant to return to the castle just yet, they made their way to Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes for their favourite stop of the trip.

Uncle George met them at the counter and called Ted Lupin from the back room to join them. There, in hushed tones, the students described the latest happenings at Hogwarts, up to and including the new restrictions on Hogsmeade weekends, which they had narrowly bypassed.

“It was bad enough with Umbridge,” George scowled, his usually jovial face dark. “She was vicious and deluded, but she seemed to truly believe she was operating for the good of the wizarding world. Fred once told me he thought it was better to live with an outright tyrant like Voldy than with a psychotic do-gooder like Umbridge. But giving Filch that kind of authority...” he shook his head slowly. “He’s neither an all-powerful tyrant *or* a deluded crusader. He’s a petty bully whose suddenly been given a license to hurt people. Why would Grudje do such a thing?”

“Maybe for the same reason he’s told all the teachers to pile on the schoolwork,” James said, narrowing his eyes. “It’s a distraction. Maybe he’s trying to keep us all so busy that we don’t have time to ask questions, to look around, to see what’s going on right under our noses.”

Ted shook his head in frustration. “But what *is* going on? Do you lot have any idea? Because the rest of us sure bloody don’t. Between the assassination of the American vice president, the collapse of the laws of secrecy all over the world, and your dad getting frozen out of everything going on in his own office at the Auror Department, the whole world is just a big, confusing mess.”

Rose shrugged helplessly. “It doesn’t get any clearer on our side. There’s some demented wizard in New Amsterdam, calls himself the Collector, who apparently *is* the new American vice president, although Uncle Harry says there’s nothing he can do about it except try to warn the Magical Integration Bureau, and those blokes don’t tend to trust him much.”

James Potter and the Morrigan Web

“Not to mention the fact,” Scorpius added in a low voice, “that this Collector person seemed to be working on a magical super weapon called the Morrigan Web, which everyone agrees is pretty awful, even if they have no idea what it does or if it’s even possible.”

James opened his mouth to remind them that the mysterious Durmstrang Professor Avior was, according to Rose’s investigations, supposedly one of the world’s only experts on the Morrigan Web. For some reason, however, he hesitated, and then closed his mouth again. Rose saw this, and frowned slightly.

“The difference between Umbridge’s time and now,” George exclaimed tensely, “is that back then we had the Order of the Phoenix.”

Rose blinked at him. “But... just this past Christmas,” she said, dropping her voice to a secretive near-whisper, “at Grimmauld Place, wasn’t that the Order reconvened?”

George barked a harsh, mirthless laugh. “Oh, I suppose you could call it that. But look at us. Me, a jokester who never even finished my schooling. A half-giant who was forbidden for half of his adult life from even using magic. Bloody Draco Malfoy! Er, sorry Scorpius. I mean... your dad’s helpful in his own way, but, well there’s a lot of history there.”

Scorpius shrugged and looked away.

“The most powerful person there is your dad, James,” George went on, staring down at his own clenched fist. “And he’s been stripped of any influence he might have, sent off on pointless busy-work, trotted out like some kind of tamed animal. They’re embarrassed of him at the Ministry.”

“George,” Ted said. “I don’t think--”

“It’s true, though,” George insisted stubbornly, meeting Ted’s eyes. “And the sooner we all realize it, the better. The Order of the Phoenix is a pathetic shadow of what it once was. It’s an insult to keep the name. Where’s Sirius Black? Forgive me, Ted, but where are Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks? Where is my brother Fred?”

He looked around suddenly, switching his gaze from face to face, as if literally looking for those long departed heroes. “Gone, every one of them. Gone. Like Dumbledore, the one we all rallied behind, the one who made it seem like, against all odds, there was always a slim chance, always a shred of hope. Where is Dumbledore? Is he coming back?”

Uncle George's eyes looked very naked as they probed James' face. Finally, slowly, the ginger-haired man shook his head.

"No. Regardless of the drunken conspiracies that get tossed around at the Hog's Head, regardless what some of us whisper to each other to keep hope alive, Albus Dumbledore isn't coming back. There's a power-mongering crackpot sitting in his chair in the headmaster's office." He sighed deeply and dropped his gaze. "Dumbledore died. And the Order of the Phoenix died with him."

Rose stared at her Uncle, her face set in a mask of stubborn defiance. "Hope isn't dead," she said quietly. "Hope is never dead."

Uncle George didn't look up. Ted met Rose's eyes and nodded at her. Silently, he stepped around the counter and led the three students toward the door.

"Don't be too hard on your uncle," he said, leading them out onto the footpath as he stood in the doorway. "It's a dark time, and it's reminded him of everything he lost. I don't think any of us can understand what it means to him."

James looked puzzled. "But... you lost both your mum and dad at the Battle of Hogwarts."

Ted sighed. "Believe me, James, I know. But I was just a baby. I didn't know them. I miss them, sure, but it's like missing a place you can't remember ever being. It's just a curiously-shaped hole in my heart, with nothing in it. But George..." he shrugged helplessly. "He was a twin. He lost half of himself. He knows what used to be in that hole. He lives with that awareness every day."

James considered this as he peered back through the open door of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. Uncle George still stood behind the counter, not looking up. He seemed not even to have moved.

"Good bye, Uncle George," Rose called gently, raising a hand.

George did look up then, and nodded farewell. James expected to see tears in his uncle's eyes, but there weren't. He almost wished there had been. Somehow tears would have been better than the blank, calm deadness he saw there instead.

Something moved in a back corner of the store, flitting behind a display of exploding wands. James only just saw it as the door swung shut-- a figure in a dark robe, the hood pulled up to shadow the face. The figure seemed to turn toward him. A moment later, the glass door closed and Ted stood just inside, waving goodbye and blocking the view.

James Potter and the Morrigan Web

“Did you see...?” James asked, cocking his head and pointing vaguely.

“What?” Rose asked hollowly.

James considered it, and then shook his head. “Nothing, I guess.” There were plenty of people in Hogsmeade who preferred to keep their identities hidden beneath cowls and hoods. Granted, most of them lurked in the Hog’s Head or dim corners of the Three Broomsticks, but it was possible that one of them had need of a bag of Dungbombs or a Nose Biting Teacup. He turned away and began to follow Rose and Scorpius, heading away from the lowering sunset.

Silently, the three made their way along the High Street, past the two-story News Stand and its rooftop newscaster (who seemed to be closing up for the night), and onto an angled side street leading out of the village.

“We’re being followed,” Scorpius said conversationally.

“What?” James asked, glancing back.

“Don’t look back, you clumsy berk,” Scorpius chided calmly. “Just keep walking and don’t let on.”

Rose hugged herself against the increasingly chilly wind. “How do you know we’re being followed?”

“One does not grow up a Malfoy without learning something about subterfuge,” Scorpius admitted with a note of pride. “Long shadows along the High Street followed ours for the last few minutes. Two of them. When we turned, I saw their reflections in the window of that ironworks back there. They’re wearing long robes and hoods.”

A wave of coldness fell over James as he walked. “I saw one of them back at Uncle George’s shop. They were hiding in a corner.”

Rose gasped. “Listening in on us, do you think? Why didn’t you say anything?!”

“I started to,” James rasped nervously, “But it didn’t seem like anything much at the time. Hogsmeade is loaded with dodgy looking characters, isn’t it?”

Scorpius shushed them tersely. “In a moment, we’re going to cross Guddymutter Avenue,” he said, nodding faintly toward the next intersection. “The sun is setting along it. Follow me closely when we get there.”

James held his breath as the three students walked along, maintaining an infuriatingly casual pace. As they neared the corner,

Scorpius gazed idly about, angling into the shadow of a low awning. The moment he stepped out into the blazing copper sunset, however, he dodged to the right, disappearing around the corner onto Guddymutter Avenue. James grabbed Rose's arm and pulled her around the corner as well, dashing to follow Scorpius.

Immediately, Scorpius pressed himself back against the brick wall and clutched his wand against his chest. James scrambled to brandish his as well. Rose stretched out her arm, her own wand already protruding from her fist.

Two robed figures ran out into the narrow intersection, casting about and raising their arms to block the rays of the low, blinding sunset.

"Expelliarmus!" Rose and James cried at once. Scorpius, however, called a different spell.

No wands flew from the hands of the robed figures, despite the fact that both James and Rose had hit them squarely with the disarming spell. Instead, both figures spiralled up into the air, flipping upside down so that their robes fell down around their heads.

James boggled at the dangling figures where they hung in mid-air. "Levicorpus?" he exclaimed, glancing aside at Scorpius. "*Not* expelliarmus?"

"They don't have wands," Scorpius sighed, shaking his head. He stepped forward and tugged at the robe around the head of the nearest figure, who was struggling uselessly in the air. James noticed that the clothing beneath their robes was decidedly non-threatening. The stockier one wore jeans and a striped rugby shirt. The other seemed to be a thin girl in green capris and a grey tee shirt.

"Lucia Gruberova?" Rose exclaimed in a shocked voice as Scorpius yanked the robe away from the girl's head. "But how... why...?!"

"I demand you put me down!" a muffled voice commanded. James recognized the nasally haughtiness of Morton Comstock struggling under his inverted robe.

"Let them down, Scorpius," he said, pocketing his wand. "They're obviously harmless. How did you know?"

Scorpius flicked his wand at Lucia and Comstock, flipping them over and dropping them messily to their feet. "I said they were following us," he drawled lazily. "I didn't say they were any good at it."

James Potter and the Morrigan Web

Rose moved toward Lucia, helping to straighten her dishevelled robes. “But how did you even get here? Hogsmeade is unplottable! No Muggle can get inside.”

“I don’t know what unplottable means,” Comstock said, poking his head angrily back out of his mussed hood, “but all we did was pop through the cabinet this morning and follow the lot of you. It wasn’t exactly difficult.”

“It *couldn’t* have been that easy,” James insisted. “How’d you get past Tabitha Corsica and the rest of the teachers in the courtyard?”

“We didn’t go by way of the courtyard, genius,” Comstock sneered. “We ducked through the halls and went out the back way.”

“The old rotunda entrance,” Rose shook her head. “Nobody was guarding that, of course.”

James frowned. “So why didn’t *we* just go that way?”

“Because Filch kept a census of everyone who didn’t have a pass for Hogsmeade,” Rose sighed briskly. “If we went missing without reason, he’d pile us with so much detention we’d never be heard from again.”

“Or maybe you were just too thick to think of it,” Comstock countered. “Leave it to us ‘Muggles’ to be better sneaks than the lot of you.”

“Shut up, Morton,” Lucia exclaimed breathlessly. “We’re only following them back now because *you* forgot how we came.”

Rose smiled ruefully. “That’s unplottability for you. The magic may be weakening along with the laws of secrecy, but you couldn’t just walk out of here without having somebody lead you. You’d have ended up going in circles all night.”

“But why come here at all?” James asked Lucia, ignoring Comstock. “What made it worth the risk?”

Lucia stared at James in disbelief for a moment, and then shook her head wonderingly. “Are you serious? It’s *Hogsmeade*! I’ve been reading about it since I was a kid but never dared to dream it was real! And then this school year starts and we find out that everything we read about *really happened*, that those places exist, and we’re the first Muggles ever to be allowed to know about it! How could I resist sneaking in and seeing it all for myself? Can you even imagine how jealous my friends back home would be? Gretchen Plotz would have a litter of kittens! *That* would teach her to not invite me to her stupid birthday party. Like I’d

want to go anyway, the shallow little minx. Not that I can *tell* her about any of this, of course. She wasn't chosen for the exchange program. But soon enough, maybe the whole world will know about this, and then... well. Sorry." She suddenly clamped her mouth shut, apparently deciding she had said too much.

Comstock shook his head. "I'm just here because I was hoping I might find *something* in this mad, backwards world of yours worth getting excited about. Seriously. You have a world of magic at your disposal and you send messages around in little notes tied to the legs of owls? That's the best you can do?"

"They have the Floo network, you dolt!" Lucia exclaimed, unable to stop herself. "And Portkeys! And Disapparation!" She glanced back at James. "That's a real thing, right? Disapparation?"

"Er," James stammered. "Er, yeah. But... like... none of us knows how to do it yet."

"Speak for yourself," Scorpius muttered.

Rose shook her head impatiently. "Regardless, we really *should* be getting back. You can follow us out if you like, but don't you dare get caught with us. It'd mean more trouble for us than either of you are worth."

Comstock grunted his agreement and sullenly followed as Rose and Scorpius struck off once again, heading out of the village.

"I didn't mean to overhear your conversation," Lucia said apologetically, sidling next to James as they neared the forest. "Morton wanted to wait for you in the alley across the street, but I couldn't resist getting a peek inside Weasley's Wizard Wheezes."

James shrugged. "Was it everything you'd hoped?"

"Actually," Lucia frowned thoughtfully. "I'm not sure it was." She glanced aside at him guiltily, and added, "I mean, it was great and all. If I had any wizarding money I definitely would have bought something. But after imagining it for so long, it was... well... sort of..." She fluttered her hands vaguely, "normal? I guess?"

"You expected something different?"

"Oh, I don't know!" Lucia covered her face with both hands for a moment. When she lowered them, she struggled to compose herself. "I'm not like Morton. He's got about as much imagination as a brick. My problem is that I have, maybe, just a bit *too much* imagination. It's nobody's fault that things sometimes don't live up to what I imagine."

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James nodded. "I guess I can understand that."

Lucia glanced aside at him gratefully as they angled into the dense shadows of the forest path. "Sometimes it's a *good* thing that things turn out to be more normal than I expect. I mean look at us! Here I am walking along with-- I can barely bring myself to say it!-- the son of Harry Potter!" She said the name with such reverence that James couldn't help grinning aside at her. "But you're not at all too much or anything!" She went on quickly. "I can talk to you! You're totally normal, just a real, everyday person who happens to be the son of... of...!"

James nodded, his grin turning wry. "I know, I know. Believe me, it hasn't always been fun. But yeah, we're still just a normal family, with normal problems and stuff."

"Oh, I doubt that!" Lucia enthused. "But still, it's so cool that you would say that."

James blinked at her, still smiling vaguely. "I guess so."

They walked for awhile in silence, following the darkening silhouettes of Morton Comstock, Rose and Scorpius. The forest spread away in all directions, falling into gloom as the sun dipped beneath the horizon. Overhead, wind threaded through the tree branches, rattling them and pushing a ceiling of low, dense clouds.

"So," Lucia asked, dropping her voice slightly. "Is it really true that some people... er... think that he's coming back?"

James glanced aside at Lucia in the dimness. "You mean Dumbledore?"

She nodded, her eyes bright with interest. "A lot of my friends never believed that he really died. They just couldn't accept it, thought that he faked it somehow. Or that the phoenix symbol that flew overhead at his funeral somehow meant he was going to come back to life. That's what phoenixes do after all, isn't it? But, of course, we all just thought they were stories. Now that I know Dumbledore was a real person... well, I guess even in the wizarding world, dead is dead. Right?"

James hesitated before answering. Lucia drew a quick breath and went on, warming to the subject.

"But even when I thought all of this was just a story, I never believed Dumbledore would come back. Not the way my friends thought he would. J. K. Row-- er!" She caught herself and smiled guiltily at James. "Er, I mean Professor Revalvier... she would never pull any cheap trick like that, bringing back a character we all thought had really died."

Even if the readers really wanted it. It would seem... cheap, somehow. But do you want to know what *I* always thought?" This last she asked in a hushed voice, caught between embarrassment and excitement. Her dark eyes glimmered in the twilight. "I always thought Dumbledore would come back as a *ghost*."

A sudden wind whipped past the five students, whickering in the trees and carrying dead leaves into the air like startled birds. James wished they hadn't allowed Rose, Scorpius and Comstock to get so far ahead.

"It would make sense, don't you think?" Lucia asked, ignoring the quickening wind and dark. "He died so suddenly, with so much left to do. That's what makes ghosts, right? Unfinished business? And I'll tell you something else..." She leaned close to James and lowered her voice to a secretive whisper. "I think he'd come back *angry*."

James nearly stumbled on the path. He turned toward Lucia, strangely dismayed at what she had said. She blinked at the expression on his face and straightened.

A moment later, both of them bumped straight into Scorpius and Rose, who had stopped on the path.

"Why are we stopping?" Comstock asked impatiently from several paces ahead.

"Shh!" Rose hissed, raising a hand. "Voices."

James recovered himself from his collision with Rose and took a step back, listening hard. All he could hear was the rustle of the wind high in the trees and the whicker of dead leaves skirling along the path. And then, in a lull between gusts, there it was: a low mutter, a voice in the directionless distance.

"Other students coming back from Hogsmeade?" James asked querulously. "Maybe it's even Albus and his Slytherin mates. They could be playing a trick on us."

"That's an adult," Scorpius said, shaking his head slowly. "A man."

"I can't understand what he's saying," Rose whispered, frowning with concentration.

James shivered as the wind threaded through his hair again. "Why can't we ever come back from Hogsmeade without having some stupid adventure?"

"Shh!" Rose shushed him again.

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But the voice seemed to have drifted away. Silence filled the lulls between windy gusts. James glanced around for some sign of the speaker. The forest seemed suddenly alive with subtle motion; rattling branches, dancing tall grass, waving bushes and vines.

“Over there!” Lucia suddenly proclaimed in a small, strained voice. She pointed into a dense thicket of trees.

“What?” Rose asked, dropping her own voice to a harsh whisper.

Lucia shook her head. “Something moved. Someone walking along, I think. There was a flutter of robes. It’s... it’s gone now.”

Scorpius sighed briskly. “Come on, let’s get back. There’s nothing in these woods to be afraid of.”

“Except the giant spiders,” Lucia squeaked.

“There’re hardly any of them left,” Rose said reassuringly.

“And the centaurs?” Lucia suggested.

Rose nodded consideringly. “Plenty of those still.”

Not to mention the trees, James thought, but didn’t say. Since Merlin’s return, many of the spirits of the trees-- the dryads-- had awoken, and not all of them, James knew from experience, were especially friendly. He glanced up at the creaking, moaning limbs high overhead. Too bad Merlin was no longer here to ward them away, to keep their age-old wildness in check.

And then, out of the corner of his eye, James saw it as well: a flutter of robes, the suggestion of a swift, silent pace cutting through the densest part of the forest. He whipped his head toward it, but it was already gone.

“Lucia’s right,” he announced quietly. “There’s someone over there. On our right.”

Scorpius paused mid-step. James saw that he had his wand in his hand. He fingered it speculatively. A moment later, the blond boy stalked off the path, pushing through the weeds and brush.

“Where’s *he* going?” Comstock demanded.

“Scorpius!” Rose called nervously. A moment later, she squared her shoulders, whipped out her own wand, and trotted after him.

“This is ridiculous,” James grumbled in exasperation. To Lucia he said, “Stay on the path. We’ll be back in a minute.”

“No chance!” Lucia cried, jumping to follow James as he dodged into the trees. “I’m not standing there in the open with some... some

thing wandering around out there! I'll stick by the people with the wands, thanks very much!"

"Hurry it up, you lot," Comstock called in an annoyed voice.

James ducked through the brush, catching up to Rose and Scorpius with Lucia following close behind. Fortunately, the increasing wind filled the entire forest with a cacophony of creaking limbs, shushing leaves, and clattering branches, covering the noise of their tromp through the underbrush. And sure enough, after only a few hundred feet they saw the figure. It crested a low hill ahead of them, flitting calmly through the trees, its cloak fluttering behind, its peaked hat bent rakishly in the wind.

Lucia froze in place at the sight of it. "Is it a ghost?" she begged, her voice reduced to a terrified rasp.

James shook his head, but he couldn't truly be sure.

"Whoever or whatever it is," Scorpius said, forging ahead brazenly. "They're heading towards Hogwarts."

Rose nodded. "But off the main path. They don't want to be seen."

"Scorpius!" James called as the boy trotted forward. "What are you going to do if you catch him? Stop him and demand to know what he's up to, sneaking around in the Forbidden Forest on a stormy night?"

Scorpius glanced back for a moment, meeting James' eyes consideringly. "I suppose that's exactly what I'll do," he nodded.

Standing between them, Rose looked from Scorpius to James, her expression tense. After a moment, James nodded.

Lucia grabbed James' arm and giggled nervously. "I guess this is pretty exciting, isn't it?"

Together, the four broke into a run, threading noisily through the valley and up the crest of the hill. James saw the glittering lights of the castle emerge through the trees as they thrashed forward, dodging low branches and jumping over mossy logs. Scorpius reached the crest of the hill first. James saw him as only a dark shape against the dusky sky, stumbling between the trees where they had last spied the skulking figure. A moment later, Scorpius' silhouette dipped away. Rose followed, dropping over what seemed to be a rocky ledge. James clambered after her, Lucia still gripping his arm tightly, panting next to him.

The hill ended in a steep slope, leading James and Lucia down a narrow, crooked path into darkness. At the bottom, they ran into

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Scorpius and Rose, who had lit their wands against the nearly impenetrable shadows.

“Where is he?” James asked, between panting breaths.

Scorpius shook his head, raising his wand higher. A squat, pale structure glowed faintly ahead, surrounded by dense trees but illuminated by the magical light. Silently, the four students crept toward it. James held his breath. The structure was a like a tiny cottage made of perfect slabs of white marble, flat on top, set like a jewel in a neatly trimmed lawn. Beyond the structure the woods parted, revealing the dark face of the lake and a panorama of drifting clouds. Huddled together, the four circled the structure, moving silently onto its broad, flat lawn.

Scorpius’ wand light illuminated a copper door, aged to a dull green, set with a single, thick window. Over the door, engraved on a stone slab that stretched across the breadth of the structure, was an inscription:

ALBUS PERCIVAL WULFRIC BRIAN DUMBLEDORE

“It’s his tomb,” Lucia breathed. “The White Tomb!”

Scorpius turned away and shone his wand all around the immaculate lawn, the framing trees, the dark waves of the lake. “Gone,” he proclaimed in an annoyed voice. “Whoever it was, they aren’t here.”

Rose moved alongside James and shook her head. “This is totally creepy,” she said in a low, annoyed voice.

Lucia nodded her agreement.

“HEY!” a voice suddenly called, echoing over the hill behind the tomb. Even through the windy dark and the evident panic, James recognized Comstock’s voice. It rose again, thin with distance. “HEY! You lot need to come here and right quick! Don’t leave me alone with this!”

“What’s wrong with him now?” Scorpius muttered, even as he turned and began to run back toward the tomb. Rose followed, dashing into the shadow of the woods.

“We’d better go with them,” James sighed. “It’s best if we all stay together--”

Lucia gripped James’ arm with such sudden, painful ferocity that he startled, glancing aside at her. Her face was wide-eyed with terror, gazing mutely back toward the White Tomb. James turned back.

The tomb's copper door was wide open, revealing a standing figure. Even in the dimness, James recognized the cloak and peaked hat of the man they had been following. Only now he could see the figure's face: the narrow, crooked nose, the snowy beard. Stormlight glinted from the man's half-moon spectacles as he glared back at them.

"It's him!" Lucia quavered, raising a trembling, pointing hand. "It's Dumbledore!"

But James knew better, even amidst the startled fear that fell over him like a shroud. It wasn't Albus Dumbledore. Or if it was, it wasn't *only* Albus Dumbledore.

It was Avior Dorchascathan.

Avior's stern grey eyes met James' over the windy distance. Lightning flashed, flooding the neat lawn and illuminating the tomb as if it was made of white fire. When darkness fell again, James blinked.

The copper door was closed, its single window black and empty. No figure stood there.

"Tell me I didn't really see that," Lucia asked in a high, faint voice.

James shook his head slowly. "I wish I could," he replied, the steady wind batting his words away into the darkness. "Believe me, I really wish I could."



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13. DEAD WARLOCK'S CLUE

Comstock continued to yell, allowing the others to follow the sound of his voice through the dense trees. James and Lucia caught up to Rose and Scorpius as they neared the main path.

“You can shut it now,” Scorpius called wearily. “We’re right here.”

“About bleedin’ time!” Comstock shriled as the others met him in a small weed-choked clearing. “I got sick of waiting for you and decided to try to follow you...!”

“Made it all this way, did you?” Scorpius said, spying the path only a dozen yards away.

Rose plucked a twig out of her thick hair. “Really, Comstock. There’s nothing to be afraid of this close to the castle.”

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“Is that so?” Comstock countered wildly. “Maybe you ought to try telling that to *him!*”

He pointed to a dark hollow where two fallen logs poked from the brush. James gasped in surprise, realizing that the shapes weren’t logs at all, but a pair of legs clad in dark pants, ending in a pair of natty black shoes, tilted akimbo toward the sky.

Lucia let out a little scream and clamped her hands over her mouth. Rose grabbed Scorpius’ sleeve in both fists, her eyes bulging in the darkness. “Who is it?” she asked weakly.

“Bloody hell if I know!” Comstock quavered. “I tripped over his legs on the way into the clearing! Do you hear me? I *tripped* over a dead man’s *legs!*”

“We don’t know for sure that he’s dead,” James suggested faintly, approaching the body with great reluctance. “Lumos.” His wand flared alight, revealing the man’s face. It stared blankly up from the weeds, the mouth open slightly. A black beetle trundled slowly across the man’s forehead.

“He’s dead,” Scorpius confirmed with a nod.

Comstock spluttered and ran both hands through his bristly hair. “Is this, you know, *common* for you magical types? Finding dead people willy-nilly under bushes and stuff? Because it sure bloomin’ isn’t where I come from!”

“Shut up, Morton,” Lucia said gently, putting an arm over his shoulders and turning him away from the sight.

Rose renewed her grip on Scorpius’ sleeve. “We need to go for help,” she said firmly. “Back to the castle. Professor McGonagall will know what to do.”

“Hold on,” James suddenly frowned, lowering his wand over the dead man’s face. “I know this bloke.”

Scorpius leaned closer as well, dragging a reluctant Rose along with him. “Never seen him before myself. Are you sure?”

James nodded slowly. “I am. How could I forget? He nearly killed me with my own wand last summer, out in the North Sea.”

Rose stared hard at the dead man’s face, and then looked back at James. “You mean the man who escaped from Azkaban? The specialist in dark magic weapons and curses?”

“Worlick,” James said with grave certainty. He shuddered. “I never thought I’d see *him* again.”

Scorpius extricated himself from Rose's grip and knelt next to the body. "Bring your wand lower, Potter," he said, pushing aside the weeds and opening the dead warlock's robes.

"Scorpius," James said, repulsed. "What are you doing?"

"This is the bloke that might have been helping the Collector with his big magical super weapon, right?" Scorpius explained impatiently. "The one who's now the new American vice president? What do you think I'm doing? Rooting around for spare galleons? I'm searching for clues."

"Shouldn't--" James gulped. "Shouldn't we, you know, leave that to the professionals?"

Scorpius' eyes were bright in the wand-light. "You mean like Grudje?"

"I mean my dad!"

"Your dad's out of the loop, Potter," Scorpius rolled his eyes. "I thought you knew that. My father told me all about it. 'No one in the Ministry trusts Harry Potter anymore' he says. They've unofficially handed all Auror operations over to that great brute Titus Hardcastle. Honestly, do I really need to be the one to tell you these things?"

James pressed his lips together in mingled fear and anger. He *did* know these things, of course. It was just very difficult to accept. He shook his head and gestured with his wand. "Fine! Do it! But be quick about it!"

"What's he doing?" Comstock demanded from behind them. "This is a crime scene! Don't you know you never interfere with a crime scene?"

"Rose," Scorpius muttered tensely, rummaging through the dead man's robes. "Tell me you know some memory charms."

"You know I don't," Rose rasped. "We're not even allowed to practice them, just because there's the chance 'you might accidentally wipe someone's mind totally blank'." She fumed, and then shrugged. "I'll go talk to Lucia and Comstock, tell them to keep this quiet."

"Ah-ha," Scorpius muttered, plucking a wand from Worlick's inner pocket. "Never even got it out."

"You think someone killed him?" James asked breathlessly.

Scorpius shot him a scornful look. "He sure didn't die of ugly. Somebody cursed him, and he wasn't expecting it, otherwise I'd have found this in his hand." He wagged the dead man's wand.

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“The voices we heard,” James said, realization dawning on him. “The figure we saw earlier! Maybe they were having a secret meeting, and things turned sour...”

Scorpius returned to his search of the body. “Or the other guy got what he needed and decided to get rid of a possible witness. Makes the most sense, really.”

James realized he was shivering. “Your mind is a pretty scary place, Scorpius.”

“That reminds me. This your wand? You told us he stole yours when he got away from Azkaban.”

James peered at it and shook his head. “No.” He was secretly glad. The idea of getting his old wand back from a corpse was extremely unsettling.

“Hold on,” the blond boy cocked his head as he stuffed the dead man’s wand back into his robes. “What’s this?”

“What now?” James demanded, vaguely dreading the answer.

Scorpius withdrew a neatly folded newspaper from Worlick’s robe pocket. James recognized it as a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. Scorpius studied it for a long moment as he knelt next to the body. Finally, he lowered it and climbed to his feet, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

“What?!” James repeated, holding out his free hand for the paper. Scorpius handed it to him and turned back toward the others. Lowering his wand, James read the headline that the newspaper had been folded to reveal:

MINISTRY CONFIRMS: HOGWARTS TO HOST MAGICAL MUGGLE “QUIDDITCH SUMMIT”

The headline had been circled several times in red ink. James unfolded the newspaper to reveal the photograph that went with the headline. A grainy image of Headmaster Grudje shook hands with Minister of Magic Loquacious Knapp. Between them stood the Muggle Prime Minister, his eyes flicking from Grudje to Knapp, then up out of the photograph at James. His practiced smile looked a bit frayed about the edges. The caption beneath the photo ran: *Muggle Government officials worldwide to witness first-hand the benign nature of the wizarding world. Knapp: “What’s better than a Hogwarts Quidditch final?”*

“Fine,” James heard Comstock saying behind him. “Your business is your business. I don’t care. Just get us out of here.”

“Was he,” Lucia asked a bit hopefully, “you know, like, a bad guy?”

“Bad enough,” Scorpius concurred. “Come on. We’ll lead you back to the castle. From there you can make your own way to the rotunda entrance. After that you’re on your own.”

“And happily so,” Comstock said truculently. “Let’s just get this over with!”

“James?” Rose called as they turned back to the path.

“I’m not coming back with you,” James announced suddenly, refolding the newspaper.

Rose stopped and peered back at him in the darkness. “What do you mean, ‘not coming back?’”

“Look,” he said briskly, stepping forward to rejoin the others. “Scorpius found this on Worlick. It’s a *Daily Prophet* story about some big meeting between magical and Muggle governments from all over the world, set to happen right here at Hogwarts.”

He handed the newspaper to Rose, who opened it and scanned the headline by the light of his wand.

“The Quidditch Final,” she frowned thoughtfully. “But, why show that to a bunch of Muggle world leaders?”

“To prove we’re harmless,” Scorpius answered simply. “Look what we do with our magic, world. We chase flying balls around a pitch on brooms. Nothing to be afraid of here. Feel free to sign some treaties and agreements.”

Lucia stepped away from Comstock, her brow furrowed. “But why would some bad wizard be running around the forest with that newspaper clipping in his pocket?”

“Because,” James sighed reluctantly. “We’re *not* all harmless.”

“He’s a warlock,” Rose said thoughtfully, realization darkening her face. “He may well have helped create the Morrigan Web, the mythical doomsday weapon of the magical world. All that his partners needed was the perfect place to set it off.”

James nodded and held up the newspaper. “He found the perfect place. If they succeed, they can wipe out Muggle and magical leaders from all over the world in one swipe!”

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“Leaving those positions open to be conveniently filled by an assortment of plotting witches and wizards.” Scorpius added, a note of something like admiration in his voice. “That explains why the Collector wormed his way into the American vice presidency. If he succeeds in knocking off the president *he’ll* be next in line. It’s the ultimate dark wizard end-game: complete rule over the Muggle world. Quite brilliant, actually.”

“But,” Lucia said sceptically, nodding toward the newspaper photo. “That’s your Minister of Magic, right? Are you saying that he’s part of this plot to take over the governments of the world?”

James shook his head. “I don’t think he has any clue. He’s just a politician stuck in a tight place, what with the vow of secrecy falling apart and people demanding action. He’s doing what makes sense to him.”

“He’s doing what Grudje *tells* him,” Scorpius countered seriously. He tapped the photograph, emphasizing the handshake between Grudje and the Minister of Magic. “Ten galleons says that this was the headmaster’s idea.”

“Now look,” Rose said. “Grudje may be a horrible headmaster, but this is some super serious stuff here. And besides, it’s the Collector who threatened us all. Why, that was probably him we were following just now!”

“But it wasn’t!” Lucia suddenly exclaimed.

Scorpius and Rose both looked at her, frowning in surprise. Lucia glanced past them to James. James gulped and drew a deep breath.

“We saw someone. Down by the White Tomb.”

Rose boggled at him in confusion. “When?”

“Right as Comstock started hollering,” he answered. “A man appeared in front of the door of the tomb.”

“He wasn’t *in front* of it,” Lucia clarified. “He was inside it! The door was opened! And it was--”

“Professor Avior!” James said, at exactly the same moment that Lucia exclaimed, “Headmaster Dumbledore!”

Scorpius’ eyes narrowed even further as he looked back and forth between Lucia and James.

“I don’t know,” James finally said, tossing up his hands. “It was Avior. But it was also Dumbledore. That’s how it’s been all along. Avior *is* Dumbledore somehow.”

“But,” Rose said, turning to peer closely at Lucia. “You saw him too?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” James demanded. “I knew you’d think I was mad! Why do you think I didn’t want to bring it up?”

“Look, James,” Rose explained patiently. “We can argue about how you feel about this later--”

“I’m not arguing about how I feel about it!”

“--but this is important, so if you don’t mind, just belt up for a minute.” She met James’ eyes, waiting for him to agree. He fumed silently at her for a moment, and then slumped. Rose turned back to Lucia. “Now, tell me exactly what you saw.”

Lucia suddenly pressed her lips together, as if afraid to answer. Finally, nervously, she said, “I don’t know who this Professor Avior is. But what I saw... well... it was Albus Dumbledore. He had the beard, the little half-moon glasses, everything. Not to mention that he was standing in the doorway under his own name!”

Rose nodded. “But this is the important bit,” she said earnestly, her gaze unflinching from Lucia’s face. “Was it a ghost?”

Lucia looked from Rose to James again, as if begging him to answer for her. She seemed to struggle with her thoughts for a moment. Finally, slowly, she shook her head. “I’ve never seen a ghost. Not even Professor Binns. They won’t let us take his class, think we’re not ready for it. But...” Her eyes cleared as she looked at James again, and exhaled deeply. “No. I don’t think he was a ghost.”

Rose nodded. “Then it had to be Professor Avior.”

“*Thank* you,” James said, both relieved and annoyed. “But why?”

“Avior’s no ghost, but he is apparently identical to Dumbledore,” Rose explained with a shrug. “It’s just logic.”

“And now it begins to make sense,” Scorpius said. “At least in one small way. Avior was one of the experts on the Morrigan Web. If he was here tonight, he might have been consulting with Worlick.”

“Or trying to stop him!” Lucia suggested, brightening. “I mean, if he looks *that* much like Dumbledore, then he might be good like him, right?”

James avoided answering Lucia’s question. “Either way, this is beyond anything we can handle,” he said, straightening his shoulders and stuffing the newspaper into his pocket. “And that’s why I can’t go back to the castle right now.”

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“Why not?” Rose demanded worriedly.

“Because we need help,” James answered. “And there’s no way to ask for it from inside the castle. Every method of communication is monitored by Grudje. If I’m going to get word out to my dad, I need to do it from somewhere else.”

Scorpius nodded reasonably. “So what is your plan?”

James shrugged in frustration. “I don’t know. Back to Hogsmeade, I guess.”

“James,” Rose said warningly. “If you don’t come back with us, Corsica will be sure to report you to Filch.”

“I know!” James proclaimed helplessly. “But I don’t have any choice! Maybe if I hurry I can be back before dinner’s over. I’ll sneak in through the old rotunda, like Comstock and Lucia.”

“Corsica won’t just stop looking for you,” Rose insisted. “She’s itching to nail you with something!”

“I know, Rose!” James pounded his thigh in frustration. “But there’s no other way!”

“He’s right, of course,” Scorpius agreed. “Let it go, Weasley.”

“That’s easy for you to say!” Rose rasped, turning on him.

“It certainly is,” he agreed blandly. “Come on. Hopefully Corsica and the rest will be too distracted by the news of Worlick’s body to notice James’ late return.”

“Finally!” Comstock declared dramatically. Lucia nudged him hard in the ribs with her elbow.

Rose seemed mired in indecision, shifting her gaze from James to Scorpius and back again. Finally, inevitably, she growled her assent. “Fine! But run! Go now! We’ll do what we can.”

James sighed hesitantly. “Thanks. And don’t talk about what we discovered tonight when you get back. Tell them about Worlick’s body, of course, but not the newspaper clipping about the Quidditch summit, or the appearance of Dumble-- er, Professor Avior. Like Professor Longbottom said, there are ears everywhere.”

“You’re still here!” Rose exclaimed, flapping a hand at him. “Go! Go!”

James nodded resolutely. He drew a deep breath, turned toward the path that led back toward Hogsmeade, and began to run.



As James ran along the path back toward Hogsmeade, night settled firmly overhead, reducing the wood to a cathedral of pillar-like tree trunks stretching up into darkness. He did not light his wand for fear of being seen, but strained his eyes to follow the dim path. Wind still hustled busily all around, shifting directions capriciously and drying the sweat even it sprang to his forehead.

He tried not to think about everything that had just happened--about how Professor Avior *had appeared standing inside the tomb of Albus Dumbledore*, staring out like a vengeful spectre, purposely allowing James (and Lucia) to see him. Why? What was to be gained by deliberately revealing himself? Was he taunting James somehow? Or inviting him into his secret?

Soon enough, the trees thinned and Hogsmeade lay ahead, a collection of steep roofs and crooked chimneys rising against a moonless sky. Windows glowed yellow, flickering with firelight, and James instinctively hung back from them, skulking from shadow to shadow along the narrow streets.

How would he send a message to his father? Surely the Three Broomsticks was still open. Madame Rosemerta happily provided parchment and post services in exchange for a few Knuts (with purchase of a drink, of course), but even she would be suspicious of a Hogwarts student showing up past dark, no matter how many Knuts he spent. The Post Office was a possibility, of course, assuming it was still open. Turning the corner onto the High Street, however, James' heart sank; the Post Office was dark, its doors shut tight for the night. As he stood

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staring helplessly at the street a gaggle of noisily cackling old witches bustled out of Madame Puddifoot's Tea Shop, drawing their shawls around their sloped shoulders and drifting in James' direction. He ducked into a narrow alley and pressed against the wall, waiting for them to pass. The witches were in no hurry, however, and seemed to stop every few feet to jostle each other amiably and cackle at some indecipherable private joke. Finally, the gathering passed onward, casting a many-headed, shambling shadow along the brick-lined alley floor. A few minutes later the cackling voices fell away to distant echoes.

James peered around the corner of the alley. Voices and music emanated from the entrance of the Three Broomsticks, but for the moment the High Street was empty. James hung back, filled with indecision. Where was he to go? He considered banging on the door of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, but knew it would be no use. The shop was closed and dark. Uncle George had surely Apparated home to Aunt Angelina by now, and Ted would be out and about, doing whatever young men did on a random spring night.

And then James' eyes alit on the two-story Newsstand leaning crookedly on the corner just past the Three Broomsticks. Perched atop it, a complicated silhouette against the night sky, was the giant news announcer's funnel and the miniature owlery. Even at a distance, James could see the subtle flutter of news owls in their wire-mesh cubicles. It was a long shot-- the owls were probably trained only for official news business-- but it was the only option available at the moment. As nimbly and quietly as he could, James darted out onto the street and angled toward the Newsstand.

A small brass chain and padlock had been closed over the Newsstand's wrought-iron stairway. James scurried beneath this and clanked up the narrow stairs to the wraparound balcony. Doors had been closed over the second-story shelves and pay counter. Slipping his wand from his pocket, James tapped the lock over the main counter, attempting an unlocking spell. The lock did not spring open when the spell struck it, but emitted a short, piercingly loud alarm whistle.

James threw himself to the floor of the balcony, hiding as well as he could in plain sight. Fortunately, the brief whistle had coincided with a sudden, raucous scuffle inside the Three Broomsticks. There was a flash of wand-fire in the pub's low windows, a cacophony of laughter and angry catcalls, and a pair of figures stumbled out of the front door, wands out,

grappling into the street. James watched, his heart hammering in his throat. The pair of wizards grunted and cursed each other, both firing spells wildly as they wrestled. One red bolt struck the Newsstand's signboard, sending it spinning squeakily around its spindle. A moment later, both figures tripped over the curb, toppled onto each other in the gutter, and cried out in surprise and pain. And then, strangely, both of them began to wheeze with laughter. Clumsily, they assisted each other to their feet, their quarrel suddenly forgotten in a slur of apologies and drunken laughter. Hugging each other precariously, they shambled back into the pub, leaving James alone again with his pounding heart.

He scrambled back to his feet, pocketing his wand again. The Newsstand's locks were obviously protected with some sort of counter-jinx. If Rose was here she could probably get them open regardless. Without her, he had to find another route up to the Newsstand's third level.

For lack of any other idea, James hoisted himself up onto the protruding lip of the counter and began to climb. Fortunately, he was just thin enough and nimble enough to scabble for a handhold and clamber up to the third floor walkway, resisting the instinct to look down at the hard cobbles below. The owls in the newsstand's tiny owlerly fluttered their wings and raised the feathered hackles on their foreheads as James shimmied under the railing, panting with exertion and hunkering low beneath the giant broadcasting funnel. Glancing around, he saw the curved desk of the news announcer hulking in the shadow of a canvas awning. His head still spinning with the vertigo of his climb, James skulked toward the desk and began to search through its many drawers and cubbyholes. Soon enough he found a collection of tiny parchment scrolls made to fit the brass tubes on the legs of the news owls. Grabbing a quill, James thought hard for a moment, and then scribbled a note in shaking, cramped handwriting:

*Dad: important news about the one that got away!
Contact me as soon as possible. Same as last time. I'll be
watching.*

He thought for a moment, reading what he'd written. Surely his dad would know who he meant by "the one that got away", as that could only refer to the escaped prisoner, Worlick. And "same as last time"

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would mean another appointment via the Gryffindor hearth. As an afterthought, he quickly added:

P.S. Make it you this time! Uncles are great, but you need to hear this!

Unsure if he had made himself clear enough, but worried about trusting too much to a strange owl, James rolled up the tiny scroll and approached the nearest owl. It was a sleek brown owl, much smaller than Nobby, with a sternly pointed head and huge amber eyes. It regarded him with obvious disdain, not proffering its leg.

“This goes to Harry Potter,” James said in a low voice, holding up the scroll. “And it’s extremely urgent.”

The owl merely glared at him.

“Look, I know this isn’t your normal job, but you’re an owl, right? This is what you do. Now stick out your leg and let me-- *owl!*”

James had been reaching for the scroll tube on the owl’s leg but yanked his hand back as the owl nipped with its sharp little beak. A faint scratch welled beads of blood across James’ knuckles.

“Look, you stupid, grotty sack of feathers...!” James hissed angrily, but deflated before the owl’s implacable stare. It shuffled languidly on its perch, then, with obvious aloofness, swivelled its head entirely backwards, ignoring him.

James sucked the blood from the back of his hand, thinking hard. Finally, an idea occurred to him. “You know, there’s a major story behind this message,” he said, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial hush. “Murder and intrigue. That’s headline material, that is.”

The owl did not look back at James, but a distinct alertness crept into its posture. It shuffled on its perch and the hackles on its head ruffled.

“People should know what happened tonight. So far, it’s a secret. But perhaps-- just perhaps-- if you were to deliver this message for me, I could include a special news bulletin just for you. You could take it directly to *the Daily Prophet* if you wish. A major story like that... well, it could mean great things to a certain news owl.”

The owl swivelled its head back toward James and cocked a sceptical amber eye at him.

“Here,” James hunkered over the news announcer’s desk again and grabbed another scroll. “I’ll write down the details. Major story of murder and mystery...” he scribbled quickly on the tiny parchment. “Who is the victim? Where was he killed? It’s all right here, and you can be the first to report it. But!”

James produced his wand and showed it to the owl, whose interest was obviously piqued. Other owls craned in their mesh cubicles, leaning to listen and peer at the parchment. “But,” James said again, gesturing with his wand, “*only* if you take the other note to Harry Potter first.”

James rolled the new scroll inside the note to his father, and then tapped them both with his wand. “*Hedwig Obscura*,” he said firmly. “That’s a code charm. Makes both notes completely unreadable unless my dad, Harry Potter, performs the decoding charm. Take my note to him, and he’ll decode both. Then, you can take your headline to *the Daily Prophet*. Do we have a deal?”

The owl continued to glare at James sceptically. Finally, it sidled close to him on its perch and stuck out its leg, proffering the tiny brass tube. James heaved a sigh of relief and slipped the scroll into the tube, doing it as quickly as he could in case the owl changed its mind and attempted to scratch him again.

“Go!” James hissed. “If you hurry, you can make it to *the Prophet* before they go to press in the morning. But remember: go to Harry Potter first! Otherwise no one will be able to make any sense of what I wrote.”

The owl rolled its huge eyes, as if to say *I know how to do my job, thank you very much*. It flexed its wings, tested the breeze for a moment, and then launched into the dark air, buffeting James’ hair with the backwash of its tail. A moment later it was gone, vanished against the night sky.

The other owls peered at James with a mixture of grudging anticipation.

“Sorry, mates,” he whispered, sighing deeply. “Only one headline per night.”

He hoped that the news owls did not know how to read. There was no such thing as a *Hedwig Obscura* code hex, of course. He had made it up entirely on the spot. Not that it mattered. The markings on the second parchment were scribbled gibberish. He felt slightly bad about tricking the owl, but this was offset by the satisfaction that he had

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succeeded in getting a note sent to his father, despite headmaster Grudje's most careful monitoring.

With shaky legs and a shiver of nervousness, James turned around and began to clamber back down to the Newsstand's second level.

Five minutes later, he dashed into the impenetrable shadows of the forest path, leaving the lights of Hogsmeade thankfully behind him. He wondered if he would meet anyone on the path. After all, if things had gone as planned, Scorpius and Rose had already told Professor McGonagall about the body of Worlick. Surely, someone would be coming to collect the body and launch an investigation. What would they do if they discovered James lurking through the forest alone, long after he was supposed to be back at Hogwarts?

Worse still, what if no one was coming yet? What if he had to pass by the body of Worlick alone in the dark? James shivered violently at the thought. Worlick had been a specialist in dark magic, he remembered. What if the warlock had invented a means to come back after his death? What if even now he was shuffling through the forest as an Inferius, a living corpse?

James stopped on the dark path, his eyes bulging against the darkness as he looked around. Nothing moved. In fact, the forest suddenly seemed eerily quiet. There was no breath of breeze, nor the slightest rustle of leaves. Cold fear closed over his heart like a fist.

"I'm winding myself up," he whispered. "Have to get a grip. There's nothing out here to be afraid of."

Of course, as James well knew, this was not true under even the best of conditions.

He began to walk forward again, following the path as it snaked into the dark. He cast around, searching the trees for any sign of movement. Did the forest look different somehow? Had the trees always been this close, this clustered and crooked? Nothing looked familiar. The sense of fear-- and of being secretly watched-- intensified.

A narrow valley creased the path before him. He descended into it swiftly, his breath coming in short bursts, and glanced around. A small clearing opened at the base of the valley, marked with two monuments, each as tall as James and constructed of loose stones. Vines enclosed the monuments, clutching at them. The sight of the twin cairns chilled James deeply. He had never seen them before. This was not the path back to Hogwarts. It was narrower, far more overgrown, and crowded with

leaning, spindly trees. He forged ahead, fighting panic, pushing through weeds and crowding brush.

A flicker of moonlight on water shone through the trees ahead. And yet, James felt an undeniable suspicion that this was not the comforting familiarity of the Black Lake he was approaching. The gentle lap of waves reached his ears now, small breakers sucking at a rocky shore.

James finally emerged from the wood, pushing between the tress as the path dissolved to obscurity. A small farm lake stretched before him, marked with a single band of silvery, reflected moonlight. Silhouetted against this, positioned at the end of a short, warped dock, was a gazebo. It stood atop its own reflection on the lake, black and foreboding and full of shadows.

James could not approach the lake. He stopped on the dewy grass overlooking it, his heart sinking at the sight. He recognized this place, even though he had never seen it with his own eyes. He had only ever read about it.

“Hi James,” a young woman’s voice said out of the darkness. James squinted and saw her standing in the gazebo’s entrance, the pale circle of her face, her drab dress blending into the shadows. “Come and join me. I’ve missed you. And we need to talk.”

“Petra,” James called faintly, beginning to walk toward her without even realizing it. “Is this where you...? I mean, your dream story... How is this even...?” His words fell away as he stepped onto the dock, moving to join her in the entrance of the gazebo. It was cold there. The air around Petra was as icy as a January tomb. James’ breath formed a wreath of mist as he shivered.

“We’ve always been here,” Petra shrugged. “Ever since that night on the back of the Gwyndemere, when you saved my life. This is where the connection between us lives. Right here, on this dock, in this gazebo. I wish it didn’t. I hate this place. But I can’t change it.”

James shook his head, glancing around at the quietly rippling lake, the dark shore. “But how are we here now, like this?”

“Because like I said,” Petra answered tiredly. “We need to talk. Come inside. Sit by me.”

Numbly, James followed Petra as she stepped through the gazebo’s entrance, moving onto its neat plank floor. Lattice railings formed an octagon around them, lined with shallow benches. Across from the dock entrance, another opening framed the lake. On a summer’s day,

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this opening would invite a dive into the happy coolness of the water. Now, it looked like a hungry, waiting throat. James turned away from it, joining Petra on one of the narrow wooden benches. She didn't speak, merely stared past him, studying the waves as if gathering her thoughts.

James spoke first, unable to wait. "What's happening to you, Petra?" He asked in a hushed voice. "What happened on that night? The Night of the Unveiling?"

Petra shook her head vaguely. "I did what had to be done. I satisfied my destiny."

"You saved my dad." James shivered again. He wanted to draw closer to Petra, but sensed that the coldness was coming from her, as if she was made of ice.

"Of course I did. *She* knew that I would... that *we* would. Izzy and me. It was never not going to happen."

James nodded. He knew exactly who Petra was talking about. "Nobody believes me about her. The Lady of the Lake. They think I imagined her."

"Of course they do," Petra replied, smiling at him. "The greatest lie of the greatest evil is that it doesn't exist."

James met Petra's eyes in the darkness. "She's behind all of this somehow. Isn't she?"

"I assume you mean the Morrigan Web," Petra said, breaking eye contact with James and looking out over the waves again. "The Collector. Avior Dorchascathan. Headmaster Grudje. All of it. Yes. Of course she is. She torments you personally, as well. Just to keep you busy and distracted and because she thinks it's fun. I watch, and intervene when I can. Like on first night."

James' eyes widened, remembering. "It was her that whispered my name," he nodded. "But it was you that appeared on the Marauder's Map."

"I can trace her when she appears in places like Hogwarts. I watch whenever I can, and I chase her there, like I did on first night. But she never stays long, and neither do I. Neither of us can afford to get noticed. Not yet."

"She'll do it, won't she?" James asked, trying not to shiver. "Her and the people she's partnered with? They'll set off the Morrigan Web, killing who knows how many people."

Petra nodded. "Judith pulls the strings. But I pull the strings as well, even if I don't mean to. And so does Izzy. We're sister Fates, after all. How could it be otherwise?"

"But you're not like her," James said suddenly, sitting up on the bench. "You and Izzy. You're good. She's the evil one."

"Sometimes I wonder, James," Petra said, almost dreamily, "if there even is such a thing as good and evil. I tried to do good last time I was here, on this farm. But in the end both my grandfather and his wife ended up dead. I tried to do good last year, in New Amsterdam, and ended up breaking the vow of secrecy for the whole magical world. Does doing good matter if it always ends up playing into the hands of evil? Judith pulls her strings, and Izzy and I, we pull ours. But in the end, we are all Sister Fates, and destiny gets its way."

The chill that came from Petra was like a silent wind. James' teeth were chattering as he said, "It doesn't have to be that way, does it? You don't have to play into her plan. You can stop her. I can help you."

"No, James," Petra said, her voice going firm. "That's why I brought you here tonight. You're getting involved in things that you cannot control or understand. There is danger here like nothing you've ever known."

"The Morrigan Web," James exclaimed. "I know! But none of us even knows what it's supposed to do or how it works. Can you tell us?"

"I'm a sorceress, James," Petra said, her voice softening again. "But I don't know everything. I don't know what the Morrigan Web is any more than you do. I just know that she intends to use it-- she and her temporary helpers."

"The Collector," James nodded. "But why are they temporary?"

Petra sighed. "You know why. You saw it tonight. In the end, true evil breaks all its tools."

There was silence between them for a long moment, punctuated only by the monotonous drone of the waves. Finally, James straightened. "I'm not afraid. I can help you, Petra. Me and Ralph, Zane, Rose, even Scorpius and Albus. We can help you stop her."

Petra looked at James again, and the look in her eyes froze him in place. "James," she said, shaking her head slowly. "I don't intend to stop her."

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The cold seeped beneath James' skin as he looked into her eyes, saw her unshakable resolve. An icicle seemed to push into his heart, chilling him so deeply that his shivers ceased.

"But Petra," he whispered. "You *have* to stop her. All those people... you can't just..."

"Every time I try to stop her," Petra said, her eyes hardening, "she wins. The strings that Izzy and I pull only further her aims. We can't help it. As long as we are three, we are one. Fate prevails. There is only one way to end it forever. You can't understand it, James, and I don't intend to explain it to you. Your part is to back away. As of tonight, you're getting too close. Stop asking questions. Stop trying to work it all out. I'm not asking you. I'm *warning* you. People will die." She stood up and drew a deep, regretful breath. "I don't want you to be one of them."

James sat speechless, staring up at Petra as if he had never seen her before.

"What about Izzy?" he said faintly. "Will you allow her to kill?"

Petra's lips thinned. She refused to look at him. "She and I have killed before. Right here, in this Gazebo. We sent her mother to her doom."

"That was different!" James insisted, standing as well. "There has to be something we can do! What about that other bloke? The one who's been traveling with you? My dad and Mr. Malfoy were talking about him at Christmas. Parris something or other..."

Petra narrowed her eyes and glared at him. "Stop reading my dream diary, James," she said quietly, emphatically. "Leave Marshall Parris out of it. Leave *yourself* out of it. What is meant to happen has to happen. I can't stop it. I don't *want* to stop it. It's the only way to end this whole nightmare."

James shook his head. "Petra..." he croaked, his breath puffing into mist. "I can't just... none of us... can let this *happen*."

The hard glare in Petra's eyes slowly melted. A breath of warmth pushed in from over the waves, threading through Petra's long hair and blowing away the icy chill, leaving only the girl that James had known ever since his first year, the one that liked to suck on the ends of her hair when she was thinking, who had a secret soft spot for romantic stories and treacle tarts. She shook her head again, even more slowly, and took a step

toward him. She leaned close, meeting him in the centre of the gazebo. Fleeting, James realized that he was taller than her now.

Her lips parted slightly in the darkness. He could smell her-- the mingled scent of soap and hyacinth and faint spice.

She's going to kiss me, his mind raced.

But she did not kiss him. She leaned close, placing her lips next to his ear. He could feel her breath on the nape of his neck.

"Remember your own dream," she whispered. "The dream of the graveyard. Of me. And Albus. And the Dark Mark. Remember what you wrote when you woke up."

James' eyes widened. He remembered, although he hadn't thought of it in a long, long time.

"If you don't want that to happen," she whispered, so quietly that he felt it as much as heard it. "Then don't, James... *don't*... try to stop me."

On her last word, darkness fell over the lake and the forest beyond. It consumed the gazebo, absorbed the waves, and covered Petra in impenetrable shadow. Blackness pressed against James' eyes, blinding him. He reached out for her, sensing that she was falling away from him, sucked away into that waiting dark.

"Petra!" he cried out.

His voice echoed in the confines of the Gryffindor dormitory. He was standing next to his trunk, in a pool of light cast by his own lit candle. No one else was there. Somehow, Petra had transported him straight back to Hogwarts, bypassing the prowling Tabitha Corsica and Filch.

James' knees shook. He sat heavily on his trunk. Something crinkled beneath him. Wearily he reached for it, leaning aside and pulling out a sheet of wrinkled parchment.

It was Petra's dream story. The pages were entirely blank now, but for a single line written neatly across the centre in Petra's distinctive, careful handwriting:

As long as we are three, we are one. Fate prevails...

James stared at it, reading it over and over by the light of the single candle. Drifting up through the curving stone stairs, raucous voices echoed from the common room, implying warmth, frivolity and evening cheer. Despite this, even now, the chill of Petra's gazebo hung around James like a cocoon.

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It was under his skin, wracking him with shivers, chilling him all the way to the bone.





14. AVIOR'S INNER SANCTUM

Scorpius' prediction proved to be correct, in that it was Titus Hardcastle who had been called in to investigate the murder of Worlick. James saw him the next day, along with Lucinda Lyon, the young auror with whom he had scuffled over Christmas break. They stood in the courtyard with Headmaster Grudje and Professor McGonagall, talking seriously, their voices hushed, as James, Ralph and Scorpius made their way to Advanced Flight.

"McGonagall looks about fit to spit nails," Ralph muttered as they passed, their brooms slung over their shoulders.

"She hasn't forgotten what happened over Christmas holiday, if you ask me," James nodded. "I still can't believe they're freezing my dad out of all of this."

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As they neared the courtyard gates, James noticed Tabitha Corsica lurking near Grudje and Hardcastle, listening in, her face taut. She saw James and narrowed her eyes dangerously.

“She’s not just going to forget that you somehow got past her last night,” Scorpius mused airily. “If she can’t punish you for that, she’ll come up with something else. She’s persistent, that one.”

James sighed as they passed through the gate. Scorpius was right, of course.

Later that afternoon was Physical Education at Yorke. In the wake of the previous night’s revelations, James had nearly forgotten all about the dreaded Muggle class. Tabitha Corsica, in her older teacher’s guise, however, was waiting for them outside the Yorke gymnasium, a smarmy grin on her face, her eyes twinkling behind her oversized spectacles.

“It’s such a beautiful spring day,” she announced, tilting her chin toward the low, grey clouds and misting rain, “that I’ve decided to hold today’s class out of doors.”

A groan rippled over the Hogwarts students, while the Yorke students merely nodded and stretched, flexing their beefy legs and necks. Even the girls, James noticed, seemed a head taller than him and ropy with muscle. He wondered for the first time if Tabitha Corsica had purposely teamed the Hogwarts students with older, stockier Yorke students.

“Not Rugby again,” Ralph muttered next to James, crossing the fingers on both hands. “*Please* not Rugby again. Anything but that.”

Corsica tilted her head thoughtfully. “Today, I think we shall play a spirited game,” she exclaimed, as James hunched his shoulders, expecting the worst. “Of football.”

Both Ralph and James glanced up in surprise. Now, it was the Yorke students’ turn to moan.

“Football’s for hooligans,” a tall ginger girl complained. “Do we have to?”

“Now, now,” Corsica chided sweetly. “We must make an effort to accommodate our guests. They come from, er, *less fortunate circumstances* and have not had the blessing of more advanced team sport. Surely we can extend the hand of friendship and grant them this small favour.”

Joseph Torrance scoffed incredulously under his breath. “She thinks *rugby* is an ‘advanced team sport’?”

“Football!” Ralph elbowed James in the ribs, nearly doubling him over. “She’s talking about Muggle Studies during our first year, when Professor Curry had us playing Muggle sports all term, remember?”

“And if I recall correctly,” Fiona Fourcompass admitted, somewhat grudgingly, “you were quite the star player, James.”

James glanced at her and felt his face heat with mingled embarrassment and anticipation. He *had* been quite good at the Muggle sport-- had even scored the goal that won the final match for Gryffindor.

“In fact,” Corsica went on, beginning to lead the class toward the sodden field, bouncing a shiny new football lightly on her palm. “Let us make the game interesting and have a friendly competition. Yorke versus our guests. The winners earn bragging rights while the losers must run laps for the entirety of next class.” With a decisive nod, Corsica tossed the ball toward James. He caught it clumsily. Corsica glared at him over a tight smile. “You have two minutes to determine player positions. Starting... now.”

The class swiftly scrambled into separate groups and broke into harsh whisperings.

“I don’t even remember how to play this ruddy game!” Graham Warton complained. “Is this the one where we hit the ball with that odd little paddle?”

“That’s cricket, you git,” Kevin Murdoch rolled his eyes. “This is the one where you can’t touch the ball with your hands.”

Fiona Fourcompass rolled her eyes. “All these Muggle games are completely daft.”

Ralph implored James, “We can win this, right? I can’t run all next class. I’ll drop dead on the spot. I’m not even kidding.”

“Calm down, all of you,” James said. “Football obviously isn’t a big thing here at Yorke, and that gives us a decent chance. We just have to stay organized and keep our wits. Here’s what we’ll do...”

As swiftly as he could, James assigned positions for his team, putting himself, Joseph Torrance and Graham Warton on the front line, Ralph in the goal, and the rest mounting defence. As they trotted into position on the squelching field, he bounced the ball off his knee and gave it a sharp kick as it dropped before him. It bounced into the centre of the field, where Tabitha Corsica stood with a shiny whistle between her teeth.

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James joined her there, avoiding eye contact. Across the centre line, an imposing brick wall of a boy named Lunt hunkered low, screwing his cleats into the mud with grim determination.

With no preamble, Corsica gave a short, piercing tweet on her whistle. James was not prepared for it, allowing Lunt a free swipe at the ball. With a ringing *thump*, it rocketed away from the bigger boy's foot. Lunt leapt to follow it, elbowing James roughly out of the way. The rest of team Yorke followed.

"Defence!" James called, spinning around and scrambling to catch up. "Everyone fall back!"

Despite the inglorious start, James found that what team Hogwarts lacked in brawn, they made up for in mingled nimbleness and raw desperation. Fiona Fourcompass, surprisingly, erected a nearly maniacal defence of the goal, rushing out to meet opposing players with her teeth bared and her eyes bulging. From his vantage point in front of the Hogwarts goal, Ralph watched the match with grim intensity, his stance wide and his arms spread, trying to distribute his already bulky frame over as much space as possible. Kevin Murdoch, being woefully clumsy with the ball, contented himself with simply kicking it as hard as he could whenever it rolled into his general vicinity, sending it far out of bounds as often as not, but managing to at least get it to the opposing end of the field.

James found, despite everything, that not only was his team holding their own against Yorke, he was actually enjoying himself. By the middle of the match, with neither team having scored a single goal, he found himself in a fortunate position as Murdoch gave the ball another of his mighty kicks. Being already at the centreline, James dashed backwards, watching the ball hurtle toward him. The Yorke defence was caught off guard, leaving James plenty of room. He steeled himself, getting beneath the dropping ball, and let it carom off his chest, deadening its momentum. It struck the ground and he immediately trapped it beneath his foot, pivoting on it to face the opposing goal. The Yorke goalie, a tall, gangly ginger girl with a mass of freckles, glared at him and spread her arms. James dashed toward her, knocking the ball lightly ahead of him as he went. Footsteps pounded behind him, but they were too late. James reared back for the kick, aiming for the high, right corner of the Yorke goal. Suddenly, and for no apparent reasons, his planted foot skated forward, drawing a muddy skid on the field. He flailed wildly,

tried to salvage his kick, but succeeded only in tripping over the ball. He fell full length onto the wet grass with enough force to drive his teeth together with an audible *clack*.

His right foot was still resting on the ball. Frantically, James clambered to get his feet beneath him again, scooping the ball forward, but Lunt had finally caught up to him. The bigger boy swept James' feet out from under him, stealing the ball and bowling James into the mud again, cursing vividly. Cleats pounded past him as the action moved back to the opposite end of the field.

As James finally regained his feet and pelted to rejoin the match, he saw Tabitha Corsica standing on the sideline, watching him smugly, her eyes narrowed behind her ridiculous glasses. James knew immediately what had happened. While she had confiscated their wands, as usual, upon their arrival at Yorke, she had of course kept her own. She was using magic to surreptitiously sabotage him from the sideline. The look on her face as he passed was a small, challenging smile.

Yorke scored their first goal quickly thereafter.

"What happened up there?" Murdock demanded, panting heavily as James headed back toward the centre line. "You had a clean shot!"

"It's not my fault!" James spat. "Corsica's cursing me!"

Fiona Fourcompass gave him a sceptical look, her face speckled with mud. James glared back at her defiantly. "It's true!" he declared, pointing to the sideline. Fiona merely shook her head and rolled her eyes.

"Hey, Potter," Lunt called, grinning. "Have a nice trip?" Behind him, the rest of team Yorke snickered.

As the game resumed, James began to sense that Corsica was subtly cursing him at almost every turn, making the grass supernaturally slick beneath his feet, causing the ball to take unexpected and unnatural bounces, or giving it unusual momentum so that it bowled him over as he tried to trap it. As a result, he missed two more opportunities for goals, while Yorke scored three goals under extremely suspicious circumstances. The last goal was a long kick from centre field which seemed to hang in the air far longer than possible, arcing toward the goal and squirreling past Ralph as if it was alive.

Team Yorke erupted into ecstatic cheers, as James skulked back toward his team.

"What's happening out there?" Ralph muttered angrily, flinging his sweaty hair out of his face. "I've never seen you so clumsy, James. For

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the first time, I think I could do a better job out there than you. And believe me, that's not a happy thought."

"It isn't me!" James insisted furiously. "It's Corsica! It's got to be! She's cursing me from the sideline!"

"Have you seen her doing it?" Joseph asked. "Because I have to say, it looks like you've just sort of lost your touch."

"James!" Fiona seethed, grabbing him by the shoulder and turning him around. "I am *not* running all next class! And I am not going to listen to these muscle-headed morons gassing on and on about how they beat us into the ground! You've got to score! The match is nearly over!"

"I know!" James exclaimed, throwing her hand off his shoulder. "It isn't my fault! It's Corsica!"

"Stop blaming your clumsiness on others!" Fiona hissed, shoving James in the chest. "I'm not getting mud in my hair for nothing out here! Win this match or I'll curse you myself!"

James opened his mouth to argue, but was interrupted by a sharp, long whistle from the sideline.

"Score three to zero in favour of Yorke Academy," Corsica called, letting the whistle drop from her teeth and dangle around her neck. "With only five minutes left to play, perhaps our guests would like to forfeit the match?" She eyed James across the field with one eyebrow arched, still smiling that smug, half-smile.

James shook his head. "No chance!" he called. "The match isn't over yet."

"As you wish," Corsica shrugged lightly. "Proceed." She retrieved the whistle and gave it a sharp tweet, pointing toward the ball on the centreline. James dashed forward to claim it as the match resumed.

He had no hope of actually winning at this point, but there was no chance that he was going to let her see that she had defeated him. He chased Lunt as the big boy zigged down the side of the field. When Lunt attempted to pass the ball to a teammate nearer the goal, James lunged to intercept. He trapped it against his foot, pivoted and kicked it back toward his own goal. Joseph Torrance bolted to catch it, followed by Graham Warton and, to James' surprise, Kevin Murdock and Fiona Fourcompass. Almost all of Team Hogwarts collapsed toward the Yorke goal, desperate to muscle the ball toward at least one score. James joined them.

For a moment, it appeared that it was going to work. Surrounded by the herd of Hogwarts players, the ball zigged and bounced gradually forward. Lunt and his teammates muscled into the herd, but could not manage to turn the ball around. Finally, the entirety of both teams crowded in front of the Yorke goal, rioting and shouting and kicking viciously.

James saw his opening. Through a mist of rain and flying gobbets of mud, he sensed that the Yorke goalie had inched too far forward, leaving a gap. The ball, now streaked with grime and pummelled by feet from every direction, suddenly squirted loose of the melee. James lunged for it, drew back his foot to kick...

...and missed. His foot swiped forward, skidded over the wet grass, and completely bypassed the ball, which continued to roll idly toward the corner of the field. At that moment, the scrum recaptured James, knocking him down and brawling over him. A cleat landed on his chest, mashing the air from his lungs. Another kicked him in the ear. Still another landed on his wrist with an audible crunch.

Someone was screaming in pain. After a second, James realized it was himself. He rolled over and cradled his wounded wrist. It felt horribly loose, and a soft grinding sensation accompanied its movements. The fingers on that hand tingled numbly.

Tabitha Corsica's whistle sounded in three short bursts.

"Everyone back away, now," she called as she approached. "Give the young man some air. Thank you. Lunt, if you would be so kind as to line everyone up, we shall return to the locker rooms now."

James felt Corsica hunkering over him. Her shadow blocked the dull grey sky. He resisted as she reached for his broken wrist, but she was persistent.

"Nasty break, that," she said, gripping and turning his forearm like a dead fish. "Unfortunately, medical methods here at Yorke are not quite what you may be accustomed to. Here, there is no magic remedy for a broken bone. Of course," she mused, cocking her head and lowering her voice, "I do have *my* wand with me, as you know. I *could* help you. But that would rather defeat the purpose of this programme, don't you think? I fear you will simply have to bear the pain until your return through the cabinet. You *can* bear the pain, can't you?"

James didn't reply, but simply attempted to wrench his wrist from her grasp. It hurt immensely as the broken bones ground together.

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She saw this on his face and her eyebrows rose slightly, along with the corners of her mouth.

“I didn’t curse you that last time,” she whispered conspiratorially. “That was good old fashioned Potter clumsiness. Perhaps that adds a bit of insult to your injury, but I thought you should know it, nonetheless.”

James pushed her away and struggled to sit up. His ribs felt bruised where they had been stepped on, but he pushed through the red mist of pain, using his good hand to leverage himself to his feet. Next to him, Tabitha Corsica sighed as she also stood.

“I hope you’ll take note of what happened here today, James,” she said, glancing aside to where the rest of the class was lining up along the edge of the field. “You can’t get away with your little shenanigans any longer. You can’t beat me. You never really could. Your luck’s run out. And I’m not done with you. I’ll be watching every little thing you do. If you so much as stick one toe out of line,” she smiled, as if this was her greatest wish. “Believe me, I’ll be there... to chop it off.”

She met his eyes, still smiling wistfully, assuring he saw that she meant it. Then, with a brisk sigh, she turned away, addressing the rest of the class. “He’s all right, everyone. Just a little sprain. Nothing to be concerned about. Much ado about nothing, quite frankly. Back to the locker rooms, now. And in honour of how our guests will be spending their next class period...” she glanced back at James again with a vicious smile, “why don’t we run?”



“She’s gone completely mental,” Ralph seethed as he stood next to James in the hospital wing half an hour later. “Sorry I didn’t believe

you straight away, mate. I should have known there was nothing she wouldn't stoop to."

"But cursing you to the point of injury!" Rose said wonderingly, settling into a seat opposite the little medical table upon which James' sat, his arm outstretched in a bath of sparkling magical light. He winced with each enchanted flash as the bones in his wrist slowly realigned.

"Not that anyone would know that she was responsible," he sighed. "She's sneaky. No one saw a thing."

"And technically," Rose admitted dourly, "she didn't actually *cause* your injury. She just created the conditions that allowed it to happen."

"*And* refused to help when it did!"

Ralph's face was stony. "There was a time when I actually thought of her as almost a friend, or at least someone to look up to," he admitted. "And later, after the whole mess with the Gatekeeper and her thinking she was the bloodline of Voldemort, I sort of thought she might have learned her lesson. I wanted to think she wasn't all bad after all, just a little twisted and misguided."

"That's because she's pretty," Rose rolled her eyes. "Boys always think the best of pretty girls. It's like a mental illness."

"Nobody asked you, Weasley," Ralph muttered with surprising venom.

The swift clacking of boots announced Madame Curio's return along the ward floor. She threw a disapproving glance at Rose and Ralph, who retreated away from the examination table. Unsheathing her wand from an apron pocket, she teased the glowing, sparkling field over James' wrist, intensifying it. "This will sting a bit," she said unapologetically.

James nodded but didn't reply. He well knew of Madame Curio's disdain for sport-related injuries and didn't want to provide her any more opportunities to lecture him about it. She pressed her lips into a thin line and sighed briskly, finally dispersing the magical field with a sweep of her wand.

"It will ache throughout the night as the bones knit, no doubt, but the breaks are sufficiently set. Lift anything heavier than a fork for the next twenty-four hours, however, and I'll need to re-break the bones and begin all over again, do I make myself clear?"

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“Yes, Ma’am,” James nodded, seeing in the head nurse’s eyes that she believed re-breaking his wrist would be a valuable lesson indeed. “I won’t touch so much as a quill. Promise.”

She shook her head irritably. “Give a student medical advice,” she muttered, “and he takes it as excuse to skive off his homework.” She waved a hand at him. “Be off, the three of you. And Mr. Potter, sincerely, if you appear in my ward one more time, I promise I will start charging you.”

Later that night, James slumped in a patched arm-chair before the Gryffindor common room hearth, his legs akimbo and his arm throbbing monstrously.

“Curio could have given me something for the pain,” he complained bitterly. “I mean, that’s what she’s there for, isn’t she?”

“She wants you to learn your lesson,” Rose shrugged from the hearth rug, her nose buried in a gigantic book propped open against a table leg. “After all, stupid injuries and maladies seem to be a specialty of yours.”

James was too tired to argue. “What are you reading now, anyway? I thought you were done with your homework.”

“I’m researching,” she sighed irritably, glancing back at him over her shoulder. She tapped the book with a forefinger. “‘The Art and History of Magical Warfare’. There’s a whole chapter on dark super-weapons and doomsday hexes.”

“Anything on the Morrigan Web?”

Rose shook her head and slumped. “Who can tell? Every magical war machine had its own code name and secrecy charms and even its own special language. There’s no way to figure out what’s legend and what’s true. For instance, here,” she turned back a few enormous pages. “This is a whole section on something called ‘The Wrath of Chaorenvar’. According to the legend, a century’s long wizarding war had so poisoned an entire region with dark magic, buried curses, and demon armies that it became a complete wasteland-- the Tempest Barrens, they called it. Merlin himself ended the war by harnessing the power of a volcano, making it erupt with so much force...” she leaned over the book and read, “‘that the earth broke like a plate, creating a rift one hundred leagues wide and a thousand feet tall. The Cragrack Cliffs ever since form an impenetrable barrier, and a permanent stalemate, between the two warring nations.’” She heaved the heavy book shut, sending a *whump* of dust into

the air. “See what I mean? Legends and myths. Even if I found a section on the Morrigan Web, how could we know it wasn’t just some story for scaring little kids?”

James frowned. “Like, maybe the earth is going to erupt in a volcano when all those government people show up for the Quidditch tournament?”

Rose glared back at him with one eyebrow raised. “Are you even listening?”

“Look!” James suddenly sat up and pointed toward the hearth. “Is that...!? Dad?”

The dying coals in the hearth shuffled and sparked as a head reared out of them, revealing Harry Potter’s glasses, perpetually unruly hair, and distinctive, famous scar. He glanced swiftly around the room, spotted James, and smiled.

“Hi James,” he said in a hushed voice. “Hi Rose. I don’t have much time. I’ve been watching the Marauder’s Map ever since I received your note, James. I thought Devindar Das was never going to go up to bed.”

“Oh, he’s been up late every night brushing up on classic Quidditch strategy,” Rose nodded. “Thinks he can still squeak Gryffindor into a victory with proper play formations, despite Lance Vassar dragging the whole team down.”

For once, James’ dad didn’t rise to the topic of Quidditch. “Considering what’s happening,” he said quietly, “staying out of the tournament might not be a bad thing.”

James slid off his armchair onto the hearth rug, wincing as he accidentally bumped his wrist. “So you know about the big Quidditch summit with all the magical and Muggle government people?”

Harry’s face tensed, and James could see that it was a sensitive topic. “I only know because it was in *the Prophet*. Titus is in charge of security for the whole event, while I’m being sent to Pakistan to audit a flying carpet warehouse.”

“But--!” James spluttered, “But that’s not even Auror work! Dad, what’s going on?”

“That’s what I asked Loquatious Knapp,” Harry nodded darkly. “I went straight to his office, didn’t even say hi to Percy when he tried to stop me. The Minister of Magic says that I’m too valuable to risk on such

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tetchy missions. He also says that since Revalvier's books were famous even in the Muggle world, my presence would be a distraction."

Rose frowned. "But that's ridiculous. The whole point of showing the Muggle leaders a Quidditch match is to show them we're friendly. If *you're* already known to them, at least as a fictional character, you'd form the perfect bridge into the magical world."

"You're thinking about it too logically, Rose," Harry shook his head. "Or not with the right *kind* of logic. None of what the Minister said makes any sense unless there's something else going on, some other, more secret plan."

"They want you gone," James said slowly, his eyes widening, "because you might not go along with this secret plan of theirs. You might stop them!"

Harry seemed to shrug wearily. "It may not be that obvious. I honestly don't think Loquacious Knapp himself knows what he's doing or why he's doing it. He's a politician, not a strategist. Talking's what he's best at. Managing the crisis of the crumbling vow of secrecy is completely out of his depth. He's relying more and more on his team of advisors. He goes along with pretty much everything they say."

Rose narrowed her eyes suspiciously, making her look to James very much like her mother. "Who are these 'advisors'? Do you know them?"

"There are several of them," Harry said. "People from the Office of Ambassadorial Relations, mostly. But there's one that Knapp seems to rely on more than anyone. An Unspeakable."

James cocked his head quizzically. "An Unspeakable?"

Rose grunted with impatience. "Someone who works for the Department of Mysteries. They're called Unspeakables because no one really knows what they do, and they never, ever talk about it."

James glanced from Rose's annoyed expression to the face of his father, gazing up at him from the glowing coals. "Who is it, dad? You know, but you're not telling us."

"I'm not telling you for good reason," Harry admitted. "I don't want you to worry about it. And I know you well enough to know that you will." He shifted his gaze to Rose. "*Both* of you."

"Headmaster Grudje!" Rose exclaimed suddenly, her eyes brightening. "That's it, isn't it? He was in the photo with the Minister of Magic when the summit was announced, along with the Muggle Prime

Minister. That's why no one had ever heard of him before he was named Headmaster! He's an Unspeakable from the Department of Mysteries!"

"Next time," Harry said, trying to conceal a disgruntled smile, "I'm waiting until *you* go to bed, too, Rose."

"Oh, tosh," Rose objected. "None of you would get anywhere without my mum and me."

"So if Grudje is the Minister's main advisor," James thought aloud, "then *he's* the one keeping you away from the big Quidditch summit. For some reason he doesn't want you to be there."

Rose looked uncomfortable. "But... Grudje is the headmaster. He can't be the one planning to set off some magical doomsday weapon. It would kill him as well, along with any number of students." She shivered, apparently reluctant to believe anyone would be capable of such things.

James, however, saw the truth on his father's face: some people would indeed be willing to murder hundreds of students, and even to die themselves, if they were crazy enough, or committed enough to their cause, or both. "For what it's worth, Rose," he said carefully, "I think you're half right. If there is indeed a plot to attack the Quidditch summit, and if Worlick was murdered to cover it up, then I don't believe that Grudje is behind it. He may be like the Minister himself: a willing dupe, influenced by someone deeper in the shadows."

"Dad," James said, lowering his voice and leaning close to the fire, "We may know who that person is."

From the hearth, Harry studied his son's face. "I have a pretty good idea myself, James. I've been calling in some favours with a few low level contacts at the American Muggle Integration Bureau. This new vice president of theirs-- the wizard who you say calls himself 'the Collector'-- virtually no one has ever heard of him. Apparently he was the protégé of the Senator that was killed last year, Charles Filmore. At least, that's the story the Muggle news people are reporting. But there's no evidence that it's actually true. As far as I can tell, he simply appeared out of nowhere. If he is indeed a wizard taking advantage of the broken vow of secrecy..."

"Then his plan may be to murder the American president and assume his position," Rose nodded. "Sorry, Uncle Harry. We already figured that bit out."

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“But that’s not who I’m talking about,” James said, exasperated. “When we discovered Worlick’s body, we saw someone else. Well, at least Lucia and I did.”

Harry tilted his head. “Who’s Lucia?”

“That’s not important,” James insisted. “The point is...”

He paused, suddenly unsure how, precisely, he should proceed. How should he tell his dad that one of the most important people in his life, the long dead Albus Dumbledore, seemed to have a sort of evil twin-- a mysterious dark mirror in the form of Avior Dorchascathan? Suddenly, James heard Avior’s own words echoing in his head, accompanied by the deep chill of the Durmstrang classroom: *It would be best, Mr. Potter, the hauntingly familiar wizard had said calmly, almost kindly, if you did not tell your father about this. Harry might be a bit... conflicted...*

James felt stymied before the patient gaze of his father. The words dried up and he found he simply could not speak. Finally, Harry himself broke the silence.

“I know this is all very worrisome and confusing,” he said, addressing both James and Rose. “And I am sorry that you lot have gotten involved in this at all. I wish I could tell you what I’ve told you in the past, that this isn’t your problem, that we adults will handle it. But the fact is, you are no longer exactly children yourselves. You’ve seen too much,” here, Harry looked directly at his son, and James knew what he was thinking of: Poor, lost cousin Lucy, held in Ralph’s arms, carried through nightmare after nightmare. “No matter how much I might wish otherwise,” Harry went on, “This isn’t only my battle. I told you at the beginning of this year, James, that I might need to rely on you, that you might be in a position to do what I cannot. It seems that that time has come.”

A sudden chill of fear descended upon James at these words. He hadn’t realized how comforting his father’s old reassurances had been-- assurances that the world was an essentially safe place and didn’t need to be saved by him and Ralph, Zane and Rose; that the adults were in charge and were fully equipped to handle anything that came their way; that his only duties were to his schoolwork and his friends and to enjoy being young and free of weighty responsibilities. He had always rejected those assurances, always chosen to involve himself anyway, and to bring along those of his friends who were willing to help.

Now, he realized that there was a secret luxury in assuming responsibilities that weren't his-- the luxury of knowing that no one expected him to succeed-- the luxury, at the heart of it all, to fail.

James met his father's eyes and nodded slowly. He swallowed and heard an audible click in his throat. "Whatever you need, dad."

Harry closed his eyes, seeming to war within himself. He drew a deep breath. "Your mother would kill me if she knew I was asking this," he admitted seriously. "But here it is. What I need from both of you is to be my ears. Loquacious Knapp may not know what is really happening, but Rechter Grudje just might. Surely he knows more than the Minister, at any rate. But," he added quickly, his expression turning stern, "I'm *not* telling you to go spying on him. I'm not giving you permission to do anything daft that might get you caught. Filch would love nothing more than to pour his torture out on you lot."

"Corsica, too," James added fervently.

"I'm only telling you," Harry went on, ignoring this, "to keep your ears open. If there are more attempts to stifle the flow of information in and out of the school, if there are any new decrees or rules about what teachers are allowed to teach, or what clubs are permitted to meet, or if there are any other changes to the way things are done, I need you to let me know. Grudje won't come out and say what's coming, but we might learn something just by the preparations he makes."

James ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "But how can we tell you anything even if we want to? All our post is searched, remember?"

"I've already thought about that," Harry said, firming his voice. "Just send a note to your Mum saying you miss her cooking. She'll be happy to hear from you and I'll know that you need me to contact you. Be here in the common room when everyone else goes to bed and I'll find you."

James nodded his understanding. "But what should we be watching for most of all? What are we most hoping to figure out?"

Harry shook his head slowly. "Anything at all. I'm totally in the dark here. You have no idea how frustrating that is. If I get caught so much as asking the wrong questions, I suspect I'll be shut down completely, possibly put on extended leave. But what we really need to know more than anything," he admitted with a sigh, "is if the Morrigan

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Web is a real thing. And if so, what does it do? We can't hope to stop it if we can't answer those questions first."

Rose glanced at James, her face tense and her eyes bright. James resisted the urge to look back at her. "Got it," he said soberly. "We'll keep our ears open, Dad. And let you know if anything changes around here."

Harry seemed to accept this. "I need to go. Your mother says hello and that she loves you. She also says to be sure to keep up with all your studies and to eat a vegetable every now and then. And pass the same on to Albus and Lil."

"I will, Dad," James replied, hardly listening.

"And Rose," Harry added, turning to her. "Much love from your Mum and Dad as well. Keep your eye on James, Albus and Lil, won't you?"

Rose brightened and sat up straight. "I will, Uncle Harry. You can trust me."

Harry gave her a bemused half-smile. "Goodnight, you two. I'll expect you both to be in bed in five minutes. The Map will tell me if you aren't."

James and Rose offered mumbled assurances and bid Harry goodnight. A moment later, his head vanished from the coals.

"You know what we have to do," Rose prodded James the moment they were alone. "We have to go with Zane into the cellars at Alma Aleron and find that old witch, Crone Laosa! She's the only person who might know what the Morrigan Web really is!"

"You're right," James nodded thoughtfully. "I guess. But there's something else I need to do first."

"What?" Rose demanded. "You heard your dad! The Morrigan Web is our biggest concern! Until we figure that out, it's all hopeless!"

James stared into the fire, frowning deeply. "I saw Petra the other night," he admitted quietly. "The night we found Worlick dead in the woods. I talked to her."

Rose was silent as she stared at him, her mouth pressed into a worried line. She seemed to consider several questions but finally settled on, "What did she say?"

"She said that we were getting too close," he said, finally raising his eyes to hers. "She warned me to let it go. To not try to stop her."

Rose's face paled and her eyes widened. When she spoke, her voice was a harsh whisper. "So... she really is involved in all of this, then? But... why? Why would she do anything so awful?"

"I don't *know*," James said emphatically. "But I've been thinking about it ever since. It's almost like... like she doesn't think there's any other way. Like, as terrible as it is going to be, it's better than the alternative."

Rose narrowed her eyes at him seriously. "James," she said, "I know you've always had sort of a thing for her..."

James blinked at his cousin in surprise and annoyance. "Rose, don't be--"

"Petra is *pretty*," she interrupted. "But that doesn't mean she's good or right. We've discussed this."

"I know, Rose," James rolled his eyes and slumped back against the armchair. "Don't you think I know that by now?"

"So what are you going to do?"

"That's what I was about to tell you," he sighed deeply. "She thinks we are getting too close. She said it after we found Worlick's body, but I don't think that's what made her appear to me, to warn us away."

Rose shook her head impatiently. "Well? What was it, then?"

James turned his head to look at her. "I think it's Avior," he said firmly. "Petra knew that we saw him, maybe even that he *wanted* us to see him. Somehow, she knows that Avior is the key to the whole thing."

Rose considered this. "So what do we do?"

"That's the easy part, I guess," James replied reluctantly. "I take him up on his offer of a visit in his office."

"He won't just tell you all of his deepest, darkest secrets," Rose frowned.

"You know," James said, raising his eyebrows consideringly. "I think... he just might."



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The plan, as it turned out, was deceptive in its simplicity, but fraught with hazards.

“I feel like I’m going to vomit,” James mumbled through a fake smile, weaving his way through intimidatingly unfamiliar Durmstrang corridors lined with imposing statues, pillars and frowning grey-clad young men.

Next to him, smiling much more eagerly and comfortably, Nastasia shrugged. “Maybe you should just puke and get it over with, you know? It sure couldn’t make us any more totally conspicuous than we already are.”

As she spoke, James sidled past a knot of Durmstrang boys in the crowded hall. One of the boys scowled at him suspiciously while the others muttered, their eyes narrowed at the scurrying interlopers.

“We don’t have anything to worry about,” Nastasia proclaimed, pushing out her chin as they turned a corner. “We’ve been invited to Professor Avior’s office. Or, at least, *you* have. But I’m totally his favourite student. What’s *your* problem, Jughead?” This last was to a very stocky boy with a brick-red face and a flat crew cut who bumped her shoulder as she passed. She glared back at him challengingly. “You want to tango with me? I’m walking here!”

“Nastasia, shut up!” James hissed, grabbing the sleeve of her Alma Aleron blazer and yanking her onward. “Are you trying to start a row?”

“Not afraid of one, if that’s what you mean,” she answered loudly, still glowering back over her shoulder. “These stuffed-ropes are all bark and no bite. Am I right?”

James shook his head nervously, resisting the urge to run the rest of the way to Avior’s office. “Are you sure this is the right way?”

“How should I know?” Nastasia shrugged. “You’re the one with the written invitation.”

“You were there when we planned this! Didn’t you pay any attention?”

“Oh, for hexing hinkypunks,” a voice rasped behind James, “It’s right there at the end of the hall. Sign’s on the door. Can’t either of you read?”

James wheeled on the spot, but there was no one behind him. “Who said that?” he demanded.

“You’re already nervous,” a second voice whispered out of nowhere. “You probably don’t want to know.”

“Oh give it up,” Nastasia sighed, glancing around the suddenly empty corridor. “Classes have started. The coast is clear.” She reached out, groped in thin air for a moment, and then closed her fist and yanked. A pair of heads appeared from beneath a flutter of invisible cloth.

“Hi, big brother,” Albus grinned, his hair matted to his forehead. “Rose and I thought it would be best to tag along all invisible like. Hope you don’t mind.”

James spluttered. “But--! The Invisibility Cloak!” He gestured wildly toward their still unseen bodies.

“It was just in Filch’s office,” Rose said. “He may have Grudge’s magical cane, but that doesn’t make him any good at locking spells. We just popped in this morning and nicked it from his drawer of contraband. If we’re careful, we’ll get it back tonight before he even knows it’s gone.”

“And we’d bloody well succeed,” Albus nodded, “Because if Filch catches on that it’s gone there’s only one person he’ll blame.”

“Yeah!” James exclaimed desperately, tapping his own chest. “That’d be me, you great git! Are you *trying* to get me murdered by that sadistic squib?”

Nastasia tilted her head and said in a sing-song voice, “I *told* you not to *tell* him...”

“I didn’t say anything,” Rose frowned. “It was Loudmouth here that couldn’t keep quiet.”

Albus elbowed Rose under the Cloak. “You know if I hadn’t spoken up we’d be stuck wandering these halls all day. James couldn’t find his own bum with a beacon charm.”

“Look,” James interrupted. “This is completely bloody mental! Why are you two even here?”

Rose firmed her jaw defensively. “I’m here to snoop around Avior’s quarters while you and Nastasia distract him.”

“And *I’m* here because I helped Rose nick the Cloak,” Albus nodded.

James pulled his own hair in exasperation. “We don’t *need* your help! If you get caught here we’re all totally doomed!”

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“We can’t know that Avior will tell us anything meaningful,” Nastasia sighed. “And besides, they won’t get caught. Will you?”

“Not if Loudmouth here can keep his lips sealed for more than thirty seconds,” Rose said, tilting her head at Albus, who shrugged and rolled his eyes.

“All right,” James declared helplessly. “Just get back under the Cloak and don’t bump anything. Even if Avior can’t see you he’s no idiot. If you so much as *breathe* wrong he’ll know you’re there.”

“Not to mention that he might have a Sneakoscope or Foe-Glass,” Rose added, her voice muffled as Albus yanked the Cloak over them again.

“Good to know you’ve at least thought of all the ways this can go totally pear-shaped,” James muttered, turning back toward Avior’s closed door. Nastasia was already approaching it. She glanced back, assuring that Albus and Rose were sufficiently hidden, and then raised her hand and gave the brass door knocker a sharp rap.

Several seconds ticked by with no response. Experimentally, Nastasia tried the door latch. It was locked firm.

“Maybe he’s not here,” Albus said from beneath the Cloak. “Is he teaching, maybe?”

“It’s his scheduled office hours,” James replied. “At least, it will be in a few minutes. We got here a little early. Still, he *should* be here.” He reached up and rapped the door knocker himself, harder this time. The door knocker was fashioned in the shape of a brass tentacle attached to a squid-headed figure with a man’s body. It was exceptionally ugly, but thankfully, unlike many such ornaments, didn’t seem to be enchanted with magical personality.

“Nobody here but us chickens,” Nastasia sighed.

“Give it a go with an unlocking charm, James,” Rose muffled, unseen behind his left shoulder.

“Those never work,” James rolled his eyes. “Every time I try one it triggers some sort of counter-jinx. I tried it on the newsstand in Hogsmeade and nearly got myself caught for it.”

Rose huffed impatiently. A moment later, her fist appeared from beneath the Cloak, her wand outstretched. She tapped the latch of Avior’s door with it. “*Alohomora!*”

The latch flashed bright yellow and produced an audible click. The door creaked open slightly on its hinges.

“Honestly, James,” Rose said as her wand hand vanished again. “You’re as bad with unlocking doors as Filch is with locking them.”

Nastasia giggled. Too nervous to be embarrassed, James leaned forward and gave the door a tentative push. It creaked ominously open, revealing a dim, circular room, lined with high, straight-backed chairs, stocked bookshelves, and an assortment of free-standing, evil-looking divining instruments. There were no Yuxa Baslatma plants here, James saw as he inched into the shadowy room, but there was a complicated telescope-like device, its lenses pointed strangely at the floor, a dark crystal ball like a gigantic black pearl on an ancient stone pedestal, and, strangest of all, a sort of ornately polished wooden box, as tall as a man, with a window set into its front. Behind the glass, encased in the box like a corpse in a coffin, was a thin man-shape wearing a turban and a pointed, black beard. Arcing above the figure’s window were the words:

TAWIL AT-U’MR
KNOWS ALL! TELLS ALL!

“I’ve seen one of these before,” Nastasia commented, approaching the boxed figure. “At a Muggle carnival in New Jersey. It’s a clockwork wizard. Put a coin in the slot and he’s supposed to tell your future.”

“Daft, if you ask me,” Albus muttered, unseen.

“No fireplace,” Rose whispered with a shiver in her voice.

The room was, James noticed, wintry cold. “This is just the waiting area,” he commented, looking around. “There’s got to be a way further in.”

“I bet this guy knows it,” Nastasia said, cocking her head up at the clockwork wizard in the wooden box. “Old Tawil At-U’mr. Any of you have any money?” She tapped the coin slot with her wand.

At the touch of her wand, lights glared to life inside the box, illuminating the bearded figure. With a series of ratchets and clanks, it jerked to life, leaning back and tilting its head toward the ceiling. Its sculpted hands raised and made a clumsy, ratcheting dance before its pointed beard. James jumped backwards, bumping into the hidden shapes of Albus and Rose.

“No coin is required for such as thee,” a deep, recorded voice crackled loudly, emanating from a brass speaker on the front of the crate.

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“Only the unwashed need pay for their glimpse of the beyond. Ask what ye will, my masters, while the curse of life lies upon me.”

The light of the clockwork wizard illuminated Nastasia’s face as she stared up at it, beaming. She glanced back at James and rolled her eyes. “Oh, you big baby. It’s just a talking machine. What are you afraid of?”

James shook his head. “Are you sure it’s just a... you know... a machine?”

“It’s a bunch of gears and flywheels in a turban, you dolt,” Nastasia said, looking back up at the bearded figure. “But boy is it good. Professor Cloverhoof would flip his horns if he could see it.”

Behind James’ shoulder, Rose’s voice was slightly higher than usual. “So ask it how to get into Avior’s main quarters, already.”

“Alas,” the recorded voice blared, accompanied by the halting movements of the clockwork wizard. “None but the Great Master himself may proceed thence. Seat thyself and await his return.”

“There’s got to be another way in,” Albus complained. “This is getting us nowhere. Look around for a door or something.”

James shook his head, glancing around the dark, cold room. “Maybe this isn’t Avior’s quarters at all. Maybe it’s just where he meets students and stuff.”

“You mean we tagged along with you under this smelly old Cloak for nothing?” Rose groused.

“Nobody asked you to come along!” James countered. “I still say you’re both completely mad.”

Nastasia was studying the clockwork figure in its box, a thoughtful look on her face. “Hey Tawil,” she said, “You know where Professor Avior’s rooms are, don’t you?”

The figure’s painted eyes didn’t move. After a moment, the head cocked back and forth jerkily and the hands made their complicated dance again. “Alas! None but the Great Master himself may proceed thence,” the recorded voice repeated. “Seat thyself and await his return.” It shut off with an audible click and the lights fell dead. The mechanical figure slumped forward.

Nastasia narrowed her eyes.

“What?” Albus said from the centre of the round room. With a shuffle, he tossed off the Invisibility Cloak and ran a hand through his matted hair. “Am I missing something here?”

Nastasia didn't take her eyes from the dormant figure in its darkened box. "Acid Pops," she said.

James blinked. "Excuse me?"

"What's she talking about?" Rose said in a brittle voice. "Shouldn't we just be heading back?"

Albus turned to glance at his cousin. "What's the matter with you all of a sudden? This was your idea."

"I've just got a bad feeling about this thing!" she declared defensively. "And... well..."

"Cockroach Cluster," Nastasia said, taking a step closer to the wooden box. Inside, the dormant figure hunched motionless.

"What's she on about?" Albus muttered out of the corner of his mouth, nodding toward Nastasia. "Is she, you know, quite all right?"

"Nastasia," James said worriedly, moving to join her next to the dark box. "Maybe we should just--"

"Fizzing Whizbee!" Nastasia interrupted, raising her voice.

Inside the box, the dark figure remained motionless, silhouetted behind the dusty glass.

"Why's she doing that?" Rose demanded. "Make her stop!"

"Wait just a moment here," Albus said slowly, realization dawning on him. "*Rose is afraid of clockworks!* That's it, isn't it?"

"I'm not *afraid* of them!" she hissed shrilly. "I just don't trust them! They're really, really dodgy! Everyone knows that! Always turning evil at the drop of a hat! Getting cursed and coming to life and developing a taste for human blood...!"

"Rose is afraid of clockworks!" Albus sang gleefully. "I can't believe it! Brave cousin Rose! What time is it Rose? Oh, you wouldn't know! Because you'd have to consult a clock!"

"Shut up, Al!" James demanded. "Nastasia, seriously, let's just get out of here. There's no point--"

"Sherbet lemon!" Nastasia announced, nodding to herself with satisfaction.

The lights popped back on inside the clockwork wizard's box. Rose clutched James' shoulders in alarm as the mechanical wizard jerked back to life, ratcheting and squeaking noisily.

"Password accepted," the recorded voice squawked from its speaker. "Enter if you dare. And let the consequences be upon thine own head."

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With a complicated clank, the front of the box pivoted aside, forming a door. Behind it, the clockwork figure of Tawil At-U'mr stood full length, its robe hanging limp around hinged, mechanical legs. Its wooden feet were carved with sandals and covered in flaking flesh-coloured paint. It stepped haltingly out of the cabinet, its joints squeaking and its head bowing obediently. Lights flickered to life deep inside the wooden box, and James saw that it was actually a doorway into a much larger room.

He glanced from the suddenly revealed doorway to Nastasia. "How'd you know?"

She shrugged evasively. "Lucky guess."

"Well," Albus spoke up, "We going in or what?"

James glanced back. Rose's face was as pale as a tombstone. She tore her gaze away from the clockwork man and met his eyes. Jerkily, she nodded.

"Let's be quick about it," he said. "If Avior isn't here, he's bound to be back at any moment."

He turned back to the doorway formed by the wooden box. Beyond it, a large, dark room flickered with blue light. Complicated shadows leapt on the high walls and ceilings. He braced himself, felt Rose clutch his shoulders again from behind, and stepped forward.





15. ORIGINS UNVEILED

The inner chamber of Professor Avior's office was circular, and much warmer than the waiting area had been. Flames roared in the maw of a monstrous fireplace. Pillars lined the room, stretching up into shadowy vaults.

"Looks a lot like the Headmaster's office back at Hogwarts," Albus commented. "And what is that in the cage? That's not an actual Phoenix, is it?"

James and Rose followed Albus to a very large cage standing on an ornate brass stand. The creature inside seemed to take up nearly every inch of space where it hunched on a low perch. The cage floor was littered with what appeared to be rodent bones, all charred black.

"That's no regular Phoenix," Rose said, curling her lip. "It's a Jiskra, sometimes called a *Black* Phoenix. See the two heads?"

"Cool," Albus leaned close, peering through the bars. "It looks more like a feathered lizard than a bird."

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The head nearest him reared back between its furled wings. The beak split open, revealing rows of tiny pointed teeth, and the creature hissed, exhaling a foul-smelling mist.

“Holy--!!” Albus spat, leaping back and waving his hands to disperse the Jiskra’s wet, acrid breath. “What the bloody hell was that!?”

“Defence mechanism,” Nastasia giggled. “Another name they go by is ‘Deathbreath’. It’s a good thing the other head’s asleep.”

James kept a safe distance from the monstrous bird-thing. “Dumbledore had his Phoenix,” he mused darkly. “Arior has... this thing.”

Near the enormous cage on its stand, a large wooden desk was covered to overflowing with parchments, inks, books, instruments, and, strangely, an oversized wizard chess set. James approached this, examining the pieces where they stood in mid-play on the board. The black figures seemed to be made of ebony, while the white figures sparkled in the firelight like diamond.

“Someone really likes their board games,” Albus said as he joined James near the desk. “Who’s winning, do you think?”

James shook his head. “Ralph would know. He’s the chess player, not me.”

“Too bad Ralph wasn’t invited to this little party,” Albus shrugged, turning away.

“Neither were you,” James mumbled grumpily. In truth, he would have preferred Ralph under the Cloak than Albus. He leaned closer to the chess set, intrigued. The figures seemed strangely familiar. He studied the ebony king where it stood on its square. It was tall, robed, with a hood covering most of its face and thin, knucky hands protruding from its sleeves. He gasped with recognition.

“What?” Rose whispered immediately. “What did you find?”

“Come here!” James gestured, not tearing his eyes from the board. “Look!”

Rose joined him, huddling shoulder to shoulder. She leaned over the board with a puzzled expression. James glanced at her. “Do you see it? The ebony king?”

Rose studied the figure for a moment, and then clapped her hands over her mouth. “It’s that horrible wizard we ran into in New Amsterdam!” she said through her fingers. “The Collector!”

“The new American vice president,” James nodded. “But look next to him. Look at the Queen.”

Rose leaned closer, her eyes bright, worried. “Is that...” She frowned, confused. “Who is it?”

James looked down at the tall feminine figurine, resplendent in long robes, her carved hair falling down her back in waves and her proud chin raised. The eyes were tiny green emeralds. “It’s the Lady of the Lake,” he said firmly. “I’d recognize her anywhere.”

Rose’s frown deepened as she studied the figure. “Are you... are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” James answered. He glanced aside at his cousin. “Why?”

Rose seemed reluctant to answer. “Because... well, to me... she sort of seems like...” she looked aside at him, her eyes bright in the darkness. “Like Petra.”

James opened his mouth to protest, but as he did so he dropped his eyes to the chess board again. Carved in black ebony, the figure’s cascading hair did suddenly look like Petra’s dark locks. The raised chin could be seen as determined rather than proud. The eyes now seemed to be pale blue amethysts.

“Who are the figures on the other side?” Rose asked, changing the subject. “It’s hard to tell. What are they made of? Crystal? Diamond?”

James leaned closer. Firelight played on the facets of the opposing figures, obscuring their details. The king was tall, with unruly hair and a pair of tiny, unmistakable spectacles. As if there was any doubt about the identity of this figure, a tiny lightning bolt glowed faintly, etched onto its forehead. Rose saw this at the same time as he. She grabbed his elbow.

“It’s your dad!” she whispered. “And the queen! It’s... is that... my mum?”

But James shook his head slowly, tensely. “No, Rose... That’s not your mum. That’s--”

“Jackpot!” Nastasia’s voice suddenly sang out. “I think you’re all going to want to *see* this!”

James looked up, following the sound of Nastasia’s voice. He was about to tell her that what she’d found certainly couldn’t compare to the eerily familiar chess pieces, but closed his mouth as the pink-haired girl parted a heavy, intricately embroidered curtain. Beyond it, a blue torch

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flickered to life, illuminating a tiny, circular alcove. The space was entirely empty but for a high wooden table and, upon it, a small book. Nastasia glanced back at them with a crooked smile. "I may be mistaken," she said, "But I think *that*... is a *diary*."

James glanced at Rose, whose face was still unusually pale. Together, they rounded the desk and approached the curtained alcove. Albus joined them there. As one, the four students crept inside, surrounding the tiny table.

The book was surprisingly small, its page edges rough and thick, its cover made of deeply tanned leather. To James' eye, it did indeed look like a sort of personal journal or notebook.

"You found it, Nasty," Albus said, nudging Nastasia. "You do the honours and open it up."

"Not me," she replied, taking a step backward. "I'm all for snooping around and all, but I smell curse on that thing." She glanced at James, and for the first time there was something like fear in her expression.

He shuddered and turned back to the book. "Well," he gulped. "What else did we come here for?"

Quickly, before he could reconsider, he reached forward and touched the leather cover, bracing himself. Nothing happened. He glanced back at the others.

"Make with the reading, already!" Albus declared. "What, are you hoping it'll suck you into its pages or something?"

The moment broke. James rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the book. He flipped back the cover carefully, revealing a creamy blank page. Was the writing invisible, perhaps? He stared at it, waiting for something to happen. When it didn't, he turned the first page, then the next. There, on the third page, was a neat column of handwriting. He leaned over it. In a low, tense voice, he began to read.

"This is an account of the unspoken and hidden life and times of..." he paused as a wave of coldness fell over him, chilling him to his heels. "*Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore!*"

Behind him, Rose gasped.

"*Holy hinkypunks,*" Albus said in an awestruck voice. "My namesake! The Big Al himself!"

"Hush," Nastasia said quietly. "Go on, James."

James nodded. Taking a deep breath, he continued. "I fear that this shall not be a happy account, and it is quite possibly as private a record as has ever existed, chronicled by my own hand for whatever peace of mind it may offer. The memories caged in these written words would much more cheerfully be relegated to the comfort of the pensieve, hidden away and forgotten. But alas, as will soon be revealed, that is an impossible luxury forbidden to this woeful tale.

"But first, a forewarning for anyone who, either by mistake or subterfuge, finds themselves viewing these words: as you peer into the void, be assured that the void peers into you. Let it be known that by reading this account, I shall be reading your thoughts, and marking you. The curse that will result shall not be on my head-- indeed, I may not even wish you harm-- but it will befall you nonetheless. Some costs cannot be paid with other than blood. For your sake, and my peace of mind, turn back now."

James took an involuntary step back from the table and the leather diary.

"*Called* it," Nastasia said faintly.

"Should we go on?" Rose asked, her voice nearly a whisper.

"Oh good grief," Albus rolled his eyes. "It's just a standard warning curse. We Slytherins put them on everything, up to and including our to-do lists. Only first years are afraid of them."

"But this is the diary of Albus Dumbledore!" Rose countered. "He wasn't just some Slytherin with a power complex. He was one of the most powerful wizards ever!"

"Fine, whatever," Albus shrugged tersely. "Back out now. Let's head back home and do our Arithmancy homework, what do you say?"

Nastasia giggled again, and then nudged James gently forward. "Dumbledore's dead and buried," she said. "He can't curse anyone anymore. Go on, James. Keep reading."

"Easy for you to say," he mumbled. And yet, he knew that Nastasia and Albus were right. This is what they had come for, after all. He used his finger to find his place on the page again and resumed reading.

"I suppose one could say that I grew up in a happy home, in that there were times of simple, uncomplicated joy. I abided with my mother, Kendra, after the imprisonment of my father, Percival, a man I only dimly remember but have always known by the rather confused legacy he left

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behind. He was sentenced to Azkaban after attacking a cabal of Muggle boys-- an act of fatherly vengeance. The boys had traumatized my young sister, Ariana, over a display of simple, childlike magic. This is what is known.

“What is not known is that I blamed my father for his absence in the years to follow. His act of revenge on those who had devastated his only daughter was understandable, but thoughtless. It took him from us. And I cannot but think that, if he had remained, if his blind rage had not overwhelmed his prudence and sent him to prison, this unfortunate tale would have ended much differently.

“For instance, my father would not have liked Gellert Grindelwald. Had he been there, he’d have said Gellert was a boy ‘with airs’, a pompous, talented, young aristocrat who enjoyed, more than anything, hearing himself speak. I know this because my mother told me so on many occasions, and I remembered my father well enough to know that she was quite correct. It was this very thing, most likely, that drove me to befriend young Gellert Grindelwald, despite his careless arrogance and heady delusions of grandeur. He was living with his aunt for the summer, having been expelled from Durmstrang Academy for recklessness and rabble rousing. That fact alone would have prompted my father to forbid any fraternization with Gellert, but my father, quite simply, was not there. He had betrayed all of us by being sent to Azkaban. Indeed, mine was a small boy’s hurt buried under a young man’s rebellion, and this had but one inevitable result: since my father would not have approved of Gellert Grindelwald, I intended to wholeheartedly embrace him.

“And it was not difficult. Gellert and I were very much of one mind: idealistic, ambitious, ready to change the world, and damn the age-old institutions that held us back. Of course, many of our ideas were foolhardy. Some of them were, in point of fact, dangerously naive, even fascistic. But we were young and essentially powerless. Rhetoric was free, without consequence, and we revelled in it.

“I spent more and more of my time with Gellert as I finished my own schooling and embarked on careless adventures. We pursued the vaunted Deathly Hallows. We campaigned for change in the laws of Secrecy, extolling the mutual benefits of full disclosure to the Muggle world. Besides being a formidable wizard, Gellert was a gifted speaker, using his natural charm and magnetism to gather a following everywhere

we went. Within two years, we had earned enough of an audience to no longer be merely young men toying with revolution. When I looked around us, I saw that the revolution was no longer hypothetical. It was swiftly becoming a reality.

“And I began to doubt.

“It was an exquisitely uncomfortable time for me. Gellert did not understand my reservations, of course. I tried to persuade him, discovering perhaps a step too late that I was, despite my best efforts, my father’s son after all. On the most instinctive level, I sensed the flaws and dangers in our plan. I realized Gellert’s idealism was driven less by altruism and more by ego. He did not merely wish to benefit the Muggle world, but to oversee them. To him, they were rather like a race of talking pets-- friendly animals for which one feels some affection and concern, but which one must eventually rule for the greater good of all.

“I could not debate Gellert in public, for I had no wish to undermine him. I hoped to persuade him in private, to subtly alter the direction of the revolution that was bubbling around us. But he was immune to doubt. His unshakable conviction, bolstered by both his natural confidence and his singular magical prowess, was beyond the reach of my persuasion. Eventually, regrettably, we parted ways.

“Disillusioned and defeated, I returned to Godric’s Hollow only to find that my absence, like that of my father, had taken a marked toll on my family. My mother appeared to have aged a decade. Aberforth had become sullen and angry. Ariana was, if anything, even more withdrawn, buried so deep in the web of her own haunted memories that even I could not always coax her to speak. In the years after being attacked by the boys in our old neighbourhood, Ariana continued to stifle her magic, to compress it deep inside her so that it occasionally burst forth involuntarily. This was sometimes harmless-- mere flashes of light or freakish rains of frogs outside the cottage windows-- and sometimes dangerous, with crockery hurtling suddenly against walls, fire erupting from the hearth, or the entire cottage shaking on its foundation as if in the teeth of an earthquake. It had always been bad, but it was getting far worse. I understood this more than anyone in my family. Magical power is like any other energy: essentially indestructible. If it is not spent, it does not go away, but builds, creating pressures that, in even the most benign cases, inevitably burst forth.

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“The most disturbing detail of my return home, however, was in learning that my father had died in Azkaban. This simultaneously seemed the least obvious but most pervasive influence over our household.

“Aberforth stubbornly refused my help in caring for the cottage and our meager land. In my heart, I did not blame him, although my youth would not allow me to admit it. I had been gone for nearly three years, after all, leaving my brother to manage everything on his own. Nonetheless, I did what I could, attempting to relegate myself to a life of simple hard work, at least for a time.

“And yet, as the days passed, I sensed an abiding secret in our home. My return to Godric’s Hollow had complicated the lives of my family in some deep, unspoken way. It needled at me with a sense of something under the surface, driving Aberforth’s rage, deepening the lines on my mother’s face, pushing Ariana further into the fugue of her thoughts and the increasing pressure of her stifled powers.

“Three weeks after my return, as night settled beyond the windows of the cottage and the fire crackled in the hearth, I confronted them all, asking to know what they were keeping from me.

“Even now, quite honestly and sincerely, I wish I had not. I have devoted my life to the accumulation of knowledge, and yet if there is one thing I have learned that I wish I had known on that night, it is this: some things are best left unknown. Sometimes curiosity is a poison, not only for he who drinks it, but for everyone around him.

“I had not yet learned this. Thus, I demanded that my family tell me their poison truth. They did not wish to. They resisted me passionately, but I would not be denied. My frustration at not being able to change Gellert Grindelwald’s mind made me stubbornly insistent to have my way with my much more pliable family.

“And in the end, after much shouting, after Aberforth had stormed out into the night, not even closing the door behind him, with my mother sobbing by the fire and Ariana kneeling before her, silhouetted so that I could not even see her face as she spoke, it was she herself that told the tale.

“Ariana, my young sister, was with child.

“With that knowledge, I understood everything: Aberforth’s worried rage, my mother’s mounting fear, and Ariana’s increasing instability. After all, what could cause more raw havoc in a woman’s mind and body than the fundamentally visceral process of pregnancy?

“The father was a Muggle, a young man in the village. Ariana insisted that she loved him, that he understood her, and that she ardently desired to marry him. Aberforth patently refused this, of course, going so far as to threaten the young man if he so much as showed his face at the cottage door. My mother, for her part, was torn between desiring her daughter’s happiness and the abject terror that, without the constant supervision of her family, Ariana would lose control of her stifled powers, with catastrophic results.

“In this, of course, she was quite unfortunately prophetic.

“On that night, the powder keg that was my family became fully known to me. Ariana was entering her third month with child, only just beginning to show the bulge of her belly. And as the baby grew, so did the tension in the cottage.

“Ariana’s uncontrollable fits became more pronounced. One morning, as the common sickness of pregnancy took her, she split the kitchen butcher block with a mere look. A week later, as she took to the weeds behind the cottage to wretch, a quantity of black ooze vomited from the chimney like a volcano of tar. It became more and more difficult to predict what might spawn one of Ariana’s events, which subsequently made them much more difficult to manage.

“Aberforth spent his time out of the house, working the land, which left me and my mother to tend to Ariana. These were some of the most interminable and difficult months of my life. My only distraction, unpleasant as it was, was the news of my old friend Grindelwald. On his own, he had become a political power so pervasive that he threatened the Ministry of Magic itself. Those who followed him did so with a nearly fanatical devotion. Those who opposed him portrayed him as a totalitarian power-monger threatening not only the stability of society, but the very foundation of Muggle and magical coexistence.

“And in my heart, I knew that those fears were not unreasonable. Grindelwald would not deviate from his plan to eventually subjugate the Muggle world beneath his purportedly benevolent boot heel. He would not doubt himself, because he was utterly convinced that his goals were right and good. His mantra-- *our* mantra, if I am to be completely honest-- was the prevailing doctrine that anything was acceptable *for the greater good*. Of course, I now knew that the vilest evils in the world could be justified by that cause.

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“I gradually came to accept the fact that, somehow, some way, my long-time friend and compatriot had to be stopped. And yet, this problem would have to wait. I had learned my lesson. The duty to my family was my first priority.

“And amazingly, in the midst of it all, there were still moments of beauty. The time I spent with my sister necessarily drew me closer to her than I had ever been. I began to understand her unconscious impetus to deny her powers. What had begun as a defence mechanism had become a habit so ingrained that it was insurmountable. She had erected a barricade in herself so strong that she herself could no longer breach it. But the young witch inside that barricade was still there, beautiful and charming and eerily intelligent, whenever I could coax her to show herself. We talked for hours at a stretch, and I began to realize something amazing: she truly did love the father of her child. She had met him on one of the frequent trips into the village, accompanied, as always, by the watchful eye of our mother.

“In a way, it was my mother’s vigilance that facilitated their meeting. Ariana was always left outside the shop, waiting patiently on a bench, for fear of having ‘an incident’ inside. There, waiting primly and obediently, she had caught the eye of the son of the shop owner, himself just back from university and preparing to begin a new life. He wanted nothing more than to make Ariana a part of that life.

“He had no knowledge of her heritage. To him, she was just a girl in the village with a rather overbearing mother. He began to watch for her appearances on the bench outside his father’s shop, and to meet her there. Their courtship, short but bright, took root during those brief meetings.

“Soon enough, Ariana began to meet him in secret, arranging rendezvous in the wood between our cottage and the village.

“Now, of course, those meetings were prohibited. Aberforth watched over Ariana fiercely, never allowing her to leave the cottage on her own.

“I could not argue with my brother. Like my father, Aberforth’s passions ran deep and implacable. But I could not allow Ariana’s heart to be so broken. I took her with me, just once, into the village to see her man. As I bided my time in the shop, using Muggle money to purchase a deliberately time-consuming list of sundry goods, Ariana met the young

man once again on the bench outside. I observed this through the window, and it was, to be sure, a wistfully sweet sight.

“The young man-- Timothy was his name-- was obviously quite smitten by Ariana. They barely touched as they spoke, forming the very picture of demure propriety, but he did once place a hand upon her protruding belly, carefully concealed beneath an oversized frock and apron. It was rather heart-breaking, and I wondered, fleetingly, if I was perhaps doing more harm than good by allowing it.

“And yet I did not regret it, neither then, nor now.

“One month later, the first defining tragedy of our family occurred.

“There are those who know that my sister Ariana inadvertently killed our mother, Kendra Dumbledore. It happened when Ariana lost control of her powers catastrophically, causing a magical explosion that destroyed the rear bedroom of our cottage. No one knows the impetus of that explosion, other than that Ariana was disturbed, psychologically damaged, a danger to herself and everyone around her. I, of course, know the whole truth. Ariana did not lose control because she was mad, or angry, or mentally broken. She lost control because she was giving birth. The stress of bringing her baby into the world unleashed every shred of the magic that she had pent inside herself for the past decade. The birth of one life marked the ending of another.

“Some might call that rather poetic, I suppose.”

James paused his reading as the shock of these revelations took root in his mind. He had heard about Dumbledore's unfortunate past, of course. Thanks to Rita Skeeter's tell-all book, *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*, the whole of the magical world knew of Dumbledore's one-time friendship with the notorious Gellert Grindelwald, as well as his defining family tragedies. And yet, not even the salacious gossip of Skeeter's book had hinted at the darkest secret of all: young Ariana's illegitimate child, born of a Muggle father, whose birth served as a harbinger of death.

“I feel like we shouldn't be reading this,” Rose said softly.

James nodded. “It isn't the curse. It's just... too private.”

“Bollocks to privacy,” Albus countered. “All due respect and everything, but the bloke's dead. What I want to know is how in the world this diary got here. Why's some dodgy Durmstrang professor have it? How'd he get his hands on such a thing?”

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“Read some more, James,” Nastasia nodded with uncharacteristic gravity. “What happened next?”

James was reluctant to go on but knew it was the only thing to do. They’d come too far to turn back now. He leaned over the table once again and turned the page.

“Aberforth and I buried our mother in the cemetery in Godric’s Hollow. Few attended the funeral, which occurred on a dismayingly bright and cheerful day. Birds sang overhead and the infant boy, as-yet-unnamed, cooed and squealed along with them, comfortable in his mother’s arms, ignorant of the gravity of the occasion.

“Ariana did not speak at the funeral. Indeed, she was nearly mute from that day onward. She felt responsible, of course. In her mind, she had killed our mother. I tried to console her, but my words were empty, even to my own ears. The death of one’s last parent is a singularly unsettling experience under the best of circumstances.

“These were hardly the best of circumstances.

“Unfortunately, as anyone who has lived through a tragedy knows, life does, rather infuriatingly, go on. Aberforth returned to his care of the cottage and the fields. Ariana devoted herself exclusively to her infant son. And I reconciled myself to the task I had known would inevitably fall to me: to confront my old friend, Gellert Grindelwald.

“Thanks to him and his growing numbers of supporters, rumours of revolution were shaking the Ministry of Magic to its roots. Nothing was certain, and fear was everywhere. Lines were being drawn between friends, neighbours, even family members as both sides solidified, threatening an all-out fracture of the wizarding world.

“Thus, I wrote to Grindelwald, inviting a meeting. Do not bring an entourage, I requested. Come to where we first met, I suggested, to Godric’s Hollow and our little cottage. There, I proposed we meet as we had in years past: as long-time comrades, brothers, friends.

“And he agreed. I see now that he thought I had changed my mind, and repented of my disagreement with him. He came not as one prepared for confrontation, but rather as one embracing a contrite, wayward partner, a former dissenter who had seen the error of his ways.

“Perhaps that is why things went so poorly so very quickly. The warm embrace that marked our reunion swiftly turned to strained conversation as we sat in the cottage kitchen, a pair of teacups growing cold between us. Gellert was, if anything, even more stubborn than in the

past. He overruled my objections without pause, turning the debate against me, insisting that I was siding with the very forces I had formerly railed against, the old institutions of ignorance and tradition. He was passionate and zealous, repeating our old mantras as if they were natural laws: progress demands change; restricting a wizard's full potential is slavery; the Muggle world needs magical rule for its own good; dominion is the natural course of human development.

"I grew angry as he overruled me point by point, but I managed to keep my composure, to attempt to win him over with reason and friendship, despite the growing heat in our voices and the fists that pounded the table, rattling our teacups. Finally, however, he stood abruptly, knocking over his chair. He pointed toward the still damaged bedroom at the rear of the cottage.

"Your own mother is dead because of the ignorance of the Muggles!" he shouted. "They attacked your poor sister, broke her mind, sent her spiralling into years of denial of her very magical nature! Your father was the only one with sense enough to strike back! And did the Ministry of Magic reward his bravery? No. They punished him for it. As a result, he is dead. Your mother is dead. Your brother is a hopeless herder of goats. And your poor witch sister is deranged beyond words. You are the worst kind of fool, Albus: a fool whose folly is a weapon unto itself. The blood of your family is on your hands! And I, for one, despise you for it."

"With this, of course, my temper broke. It was inevitable. I leapt to my feet. Wands flashed. I attempted a mere disarming spell, meaning only to subdue and shame him. He was too fast, however, countering instantly. And with that, the duel was engaged.

"Technically, we were quite evenly matched. Gellert, however, had expanded his grasp of dark magic since I had last seen him, and this threw me off balance, forced me to retreat, to defend rather than to attack.

"And yet, as the duel progressed, this was not my greatest weakness. The simple fact was that I did not truly wish to defeat my old friend. I had summoned him to reason with him, to convince him of the error of his plans. I had no desire to destroy him. I was partly responsible for him, after all. I had helped define his revolutionary ideologies. And even in that moment, some small part of me still clung to them. My divided mind hobbled me. Grindelwald, however, had the zeal of absolute conviction on his side. He was an unstoppable force, firmly in

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the teeth of his perceived destiny. He would kill me, I realized, and feel quite justified in doing so. It would be regrettable, but necessary-- *for the greater good*.

"Spells flashed and exploded all around, illuminating and damaging the cottage as we fought. Fortunately, we were alone in our duel, both Ariana and Aberforth being out in the fields. The noise was indescribable, and I wondered that the cottage should be able to withstand such a magical onslaught. This was a distant concern, however, as my lack of conviction foretold my own impending loss. Gellert would defeat me, and all because I could not separate myself from the memory of our years together.

"I simply could not think of him as a true enemy, worthy of my fiercest attacks.

"Desperately, I broke away from the duel, turning my wand toward the hearth, destroying it and summoning an avalanche of broken stone. In the chaos, I escaped into the hall and ducked into a bedroom, sealing the door with an immobility charm.

"And only then did I learn that Gellert and I were not, in fact, alone in the cottage.

"Arianna's baby lay in the crib at the foot of the bed, his eyes wide, his tiny fists curled against his chest. He blinked at me silently, still wrapped in bedclothes.

"Coldness enveloped me. I could not allow harm to come to the child, especially not after what Gellert had said to me. Because deep down, I feared he was correct. Perhaps I was partly responsible for everything that had happened so far. Perhaps I should have joined my father in attacking those who had harmed Ariana. Perhaps my mother's blood was indeed on my hands.

"I shook these thoughts from my head and clamped my eyes shut. It was this very duplicity that weakened me. At the moment, I had no luxury for self-doubt. If I was to save myself and my infant nephew-- if I was to defeat my former friend and newfound nemesis-- I needed something more than magical prowess. I needed conviction.

"I needed to rid myself of the memories that hobbled me.

"I had no pensieve in those days, but I knew of their existence, and had experimented with them. I knew that they allowed a wizard to extract and view his own memories. What I needed in that moment, however, was a method of *completely removing* memories from my own

mind, if only temporarily, if only for the time it would take to defeat Grindelwald. I knew such magic was possible, albeit fraught with dangers. But with no pensieve at my disposal, how could I accomplish such a thing? Where could I store the memories of my old friend? Where could I temporarily hide the clouding influence of our long history and shared ideas?

“Gellert pounded upon the door, not with his fists, but with a *convulsis* spell. I recognized the strength of it. He called to me, demanding that I open the door, that I face him and finish what was begun. I knew that he would not relent, and that the sealed door would not keep him long at bay. The walls shuddered and cracked as he renewed his attacks.

“And it is at this point in the tale that I hope the reader-- not that there shall ever be one-- will extend to me some small grace. I was young, and desperate, and afraid. I had, perhaps, a bit more intelligence than wisdom. For when I turned back to the darkness of the bedroom, I saw the very thing I most needed. I saw a pensieve. It awaited me patiently, silently, sucking its tiny fist as it regarded me with solemn, wide eyes.

“The infant could hold my conflicting thoughts for me. There was no harm in it-- the child’s tiny brain would no sooner comprehend them than it could comprehend the words in my spellbooks. My own thoughts and memories could lie undiluted in that tiny brain for the time it would take to defeat Grindelwald, leaving me unconflicted and steady of conviction.

“And that, I fear, is exactly what I did. I approached my infant nephew’s crib even as the floor shook and the door pounded, even as magical light exploded through widening cracks in the ceiling and walls. I touched my wand to my head, and amidst the increasing chaos, I concentrated, calling on every shred of my creative magical energies.

“I siphoned off all memory of my friendship with Gellert Grindelwald, leaving no echo of it in my own mind. For good measure, I included all of our shared ideas-- the inherent weakness of the Muggle world, the justification of all in the name of the greater good, the memories of my mother’s death, and before that, Ariana’s demented fugues, and even before that, the attack of those who did not understand her and her powers. I poured it all into a long, silvery thread, pulled it carefully from my own temple, and felt it emptying blissfully from my mind. The thread pulsed on the end of my wand, long and thick, loaded

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with my own haunting past. Even in the midst of the ensuing chaos, I felt some small thrill of gratification: the experiment had worked. Echoless memory extraction was indeed possible.

“With no compunction, carefully, gently, I placed the memory against the temple of my infant nephew. He absorbed it without blinking. I saw it vanish into his head, slowly but surely. When I took my wand from him, it was dark, empty, and cold. It was ready for battle.

“As was I.

...

“And here, dear Impossible Reader, is where my direct memory of these events falters. The rest I only know by the retelling of others, by guesswork, and by my own considerable skill at divination.

“The duel recommenced. But there was no clear winner. Ariana and Aberforth returned to the cottage in a panic at the very height of the battle, finding two figures locked in warfare so bright, so intense, so devastating that it destroyed what remained of the cottage. Ariana, unfortunately, was killed, crushed in the wreckage. Aberforth was thrown some distance away, unconscious as the cottage burned merrily, sparking with magical aftermath.

“Gellert Grindelwald barely escaped with his life, chased by his nemesis, a man whose conviction had returned in force, shocking in its severity and grim in its determination.

“And forgotten amidst it all, if only for a moment, was a young baby boy, crying amidst the flames as the cottage crashed all around him. His cries floated into the night air, reaching the ears of a man who had run to the cottage in alarm, summoned by the noise of the duel. Finding the cottage collapsing in flames, the man-- a poor itinerant Muggle of nearly fifty-- braved the inferno, burning his hands quite severely as he sought out the tiny wailing cries.

“He took the baby home to his wife.

“He assumed that the baby’s family had died in the fire.

“He and his wife raised the baby as their own, taking him with them on their interminable travels, naturally untraceable, even when, some years later, they finally settled on the coast of Norway’s Svalbard region.

“And as the baby grew-- as his tiny brain expanded and took on language and began to form its own memories-- the thoughts that had been planted inside him began to blossom. Like an invasive vine consuming an entire garden, the power of those memories took control of the boy. He somehow knew they were not his, but he absorbed them helplessly.

“They defined him. His innate personality bent before the personality injected into him, even influencing his appearance. He *became* the person from whom those memories originated.

“He resented this. And simultaneously embraced it. He hated the person that had invaded him, made him his dark mirror. But there was a good side.

“Because that person had been *powerful*. And even at a young age, even in the midst of a perfectly prosaic Muggle upbringing, the boy knew that power was good. Someday it would allow him to become everything that his benign double had been afraid to be.

“I, of course, was that boy. I have adopted the name given to me by my Muggle family-- Avior Dorchascathan-- but I am now, and will forever be, Albus Dumbledore’s unwitting doppelganger. He abandoned me to my fate. Admittedly, he searched for me. I know this now. I have made quite a study of my now-dead ‘benefactor’. But he failed to find me. He failed because *I did not wish* to be found-- I used his own prodigious magic to construct a shield, to hide myself from him, and others like him. He made me. He gave me both his convictions and his powers. The guilt of this consumed him, but I would not allow him relief. I was a mere ghost to him, untraceable, haunting his past. I desired nothing more than that he live with the torment of what he had done.

“Not to mention the fact that, had he found me, he could have undone his work. He could have removed the memories that define me, and with them the exceptional power that drives me. I refused to allow that to happen, despite the fact that his memories imprison me. I am their slave, and for me there is no respite, no bliss of a pensieve.

“I *am* a pensieve, you see.

“This is the burden that I have borne throughout my years. I lived in the terror that Albus Dumbledore would find me and take from me his dark gift. And yet, I lived in the hope that he *would* find me nonetheless, and grant me release. The friction of those two desires was like a fault line in my soul, tearing me in two.

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“But now, thankfully, blessedly, Albus Dumbledore is dead. His body lies buried in a White Tomb. I go there to be sure of it sometimes--to assure myself that he is indeed gone, a mere husk of dead flesh and bone.

“His death has freed me. Now, finally, I will accomplish the destiny that he was too conflicted to fulfil. I will finish the work of the man he bested. For I have the best of both of them: I have Gellert Grindelwald’s singular conviction, and Albus Dumbledore’s unmatched power.

“Let this record stand for the manifesto I could never write, but which will surely arise once my work is complete. My plan is set into motion. The pieces move according to my design. Allies have come to my side. Soon, the destiny of all magical kind will be fulfilled with finality.

“For Wizardkind.

“For Progress.

“For the Natural Order.

“For the *GREATER GOOD*.”



James stared at the diary’s last phrase, too stunned to move. Albus stirred next to him. Tentatively, he reached forward and turned the page. It was blank.

“You were right, James,” Rose said, awed. “Avior *is* Dumbledore’s magical twin.”

James shook his head. “He’s not a twin at all,” he said, stepping back from the diary. “He’s... something else. Something worse.”

“He’s a golem,” Nastasia said soberly.

Albus glanced at her. "A what?"

"A golem. We just learned about them in Professor Bunyon's History of Magic. It's a clay statue brought to life by a magical scroll in its head. The words on the scroll give it its personality and drive its every action."

"Except the words on Avior's scroll are all the worst things about Albus Dumbledore," Rose nodded, her eyes wide and grave. "It's all of his faults, but without any of his virtues. He's... he's *evil* Dumbledore!"

The words hung in the air sounding simultaneously preposterous and chilling.

And in the main chamber of Avior's office, the hearth flared bright green, illuminating the room and throwing shadows up onto the flimsy curtains of the diary alcove.

"He's coming!" Albus declared, slamming the diary shut. "Quick, hide!"

Instinctively, James jerked the alcove curtains shut and threw himself against the wall next to them, dragging Nastasia alongside. Albus and Rose disappeared in a flurry of vanishing fabric. At precisely the same moment, a pair of footsteps clunked onto the stone floor of the main chamber. A shadowy silhouette appeared against the alcove curtains as the green light died away, replaced with flickering yellow.

For nearly a minute, the shadowy figure did not move. James struggled to hold his breath. He realized he was still clutching Nastasia to him. Silently, he let go of her and pushed her backwards into the alcove. She sidled up next to him.

And then, startling James severely, the shadowy figure spoke his name.

"James Potter. I knew we would meet again. Do come out. There is no need to hide."

James couldn't move. His eyes bulged in the darkness. It wasn't just that he was caught. It was that the voice was all wrong. He had expected Professor Avior. But this voice was different. It was deeper, more vicious, with a hint of a teasing growl in it. He recognized it.

The last time he had heard it, he'd been in New Amsterdam.

He turned to Nastasia, his eyes wide and shocked. "The Collector?!" he mouthed. She frowned at him in the darkness.

Finally, the silhouette on the curtains moved. "You've been reading my diary, Mr. Potter," the voice chided. "You should not be

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surprised that I know this. The warnings at the beginning were quite clear: as you read my words, I read you. Be grateful that I waited for you to finish before interrupting you.”

Nastasia was still frowning at James in the dark. She shook her head. “Avior,” she mouthed. She was right. Despite how the voice had initially sounded, it was now unmistakably that of Avior Dorchascathan.

Behind James, the curtains jerked back, opening fully and admitting the yellow flicker of the hearth, as well as a long, tall shadow on the back wall.

“There is no need to fear, Mr. Potter,” the shadow said. “And good evening to you as well, Ms. Hendrix. Tea?”

Nastasia smiled and shrugged. “Why not? When in Rome. Lots of sugar, lots of cream if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” the figure sighed.

James turned and looked up, studying the tall figure. It was Professor Avior, right down to the half-moon spectacles, crooked, blade-like nose, and rakish peaked hat. He smiled coolly at James, then, with a welcoming sweep of his arm, beckoned them into the office proper.

“You now know all of my secrets, Mr. Potter,” he said, noticing James’ hesitation. “Please, let us not stand on formality. We are like the closest of friends and the deepest of confidantes. You need not hesitate in my presence.”

Nastasia tugged at James’ arm, drawing him out of the alcove. He followed her to a large, low sofa near the hearth. She plopped onto it easily but James remained standing.

“Ask what you will, Mr. Potter,” Avior called as he flicked his wand, summoning a silver tea set from across the room. It lofted effortlessly, glinting in the darkness, and followed him to the sofa. “It does not take an expert at divination to know that you are simply bursting with questions.”

James’ lips remained clamped shut. The truth was that he was so full of questions-- and no small amount of fear-- that he felt completely stymied. Finally, as Avior used his wand to levitate the teapot and fill a steaming cup, one question pushed to the forefront of his curiosity.

“Why did you let us read your diary?”

Avior smiled as he poured a second cup. “Straight to the root of the matter,” he nodded, “Your forthrightness is one of your strongest traits, Mr. Potter. It’s a gift, really.”

He finished pouring the tea, and then settled himself into a large armchair opposite the sofa. He stared at James over his raised teacup, smiling faintly.

“I allowed you to read my diary, Mr. Potter,” he answered slowly, “because I wished you to. I knew you were curious about me. That is why I invited you to my quarters, if you’ll recall. I knew that if we were to be friends... and perhaps even compatriots... then we needed to start with a foundation of trust and honesty. I already knew your story, James. I have been quite a student of your exploits, albeit secretly. It was only fair, then, that you should know mine.”

James shook his head, confused. “But... why? What’s the point? I mean, I feel sort of bad for what happened to you and all--”

“Tut,” Avior said, closing his eyes and raising a thin hand. “You misunderstand me, James. You really might try being a bit more like Ms. Hendricks here. She understands these things very well, I suspect. Am I correct, young lady?”

Nastasia bobbed her head and swirled her tea. “You wanted James to know your story because it makes you both even. It’s fair that way. No secrets.”

“Precisely,” Avior nodded. “I do not require your sympathy, James. Nor anyone else’s. I do not begrudge my fate any longer. No, in fact, I embrace it. The simple fact is that I do not suffer from my ‘benefactor’s’ greatest flaw: Albus Dumbledore, you see, was a legendary keeper of secrets. He hid them away from those who most deserved his trust. Your father, James, suffered for this. For months at a stretch, Albus Dumbledore kept him deliberately in the dark, starved of information and trust. Even today, this torments your father, although I doubt he is fully aware of it himself. Had Dumbledore been fully honest with Harry, things might have been different. Why, Dumbledore might even still be alive.” Avior paused, his face clouding slightly at this idea. After a moment, he shook himself. “My point is this: Albus Dumbledore spent a lifetime hiding much and revealing little. I do not suffer from that error. I have laid bare my complete past to you, James. As a sign of trust. Of balance.”

James finally sank onto the couch next to Nastasia. “But... I still don’t understand. Why?”

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Avior turned from James to Nastasia, his eyebrows rising inquisitively. “Have you read the books based on the famed Harry Potter, Ms. Hendricks? The ones by the talented Ms. Revalvier?”

Nastasia nodded and grinned. “Who didn’t? When I was a kid, we devoured them like candy.”

“Tell me,” Avior went on, gazing thoughtfully into the darkness overhead. “Why do you believe it is important to me that I undo the mistakes of my unwitting twin?”

Nastasia drew a deep breath and seemed to give the question a moment’s thought. James watched her, both impressed and annoyed at her apparent ease.

“I suppose because just as old Dumbledore needed Harry, *you* need *James*,” she finally suggested, shrugging. “Wheels within wheels, history repeating itself and all that.”

“Well,” Avior hedged, “‘need’ is a rather strong word. But I do believe you have hit upon the crux of the matter nonetheless, Ms. Hendricks, and I am not surprised. Time, James, is a circle. You are too young to know this, but the past does repeat itself all the time, endlessly. Even the Muggles understand this. They have a saying: those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it. But this is a flawed idea. The wisest of us do not shy away from repeating history. The wisest of us seek to recognize the patterns and not just repeat them, but *improve* upon them. Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore were the first cycle. You and I, James, are the second. We must not make the mistakes they did. I have done my part by not withholding my past from you, as Dumbledore did with your father. Similarly, I have hopes that you will make an effort not to repeat your father’s... miscalculations.”

James’ mind was reeling. The frown on his face felt permanently plastered there. “I...” he shook his head worriedly. “I don’t know what you mean. What am I supposed to do?”

“It’s simple, James,” Avior answered easily. “You have begun to oppose me. You do not know it, but it is true. You followed me in the Forbidden Forest, uncovered some small corner of my plan, and attempted to reveal it to the powers that be, for all the good that it will do. This is not the way it is supposed to happen, my young friend. Destiny has a different plan for you.” He glanced toward his desk, toward the oversized chess board with its arranged pieces. “We all have our parts to

play. We must improve upon history, not thwart it. We must not make the same errors as Dumbledore and your legendary father.”

James shook his head again, more firmly this time. “But they didn’t make any mistakes. They won, didn’t they? I mean, sure Dumbledore died. Maybe that could have been prevented somehow. But together with a load of friends and helpers they beat Voldemort.”

“And under the circumstances,” Avior nodded, setting his teacup aside on a small table. “That was, somewhat regrettably, necessary. The Dark Lord suffered from delusions of crippling grandeur. He had become a caricature, a megalomaniac. He had forgotten his true purpose, and therefore become a liability. I watched all of this, knew how it must end, even without the aid of my divinations. The cycle was not ready to be complete. But now, the cycle is begun anew. Now, it will be accomplished as it should have been then. The strategy of visionary, if misunderstood, wizards since Salazar Slytherin himself will finally be brought to fruition.”

A cold chill ran down James’ back, settling in his feet and turning them to blocks of ice. Not for the first time, he longed for the steadying counsel of Headmaster Merlin, whose worldview had always seemed so comfortingly simple, if frustratingly black and white. “But... you’re talking about destroying the Vow of Secrecy and taking over the Muggle world.”

Avior shook his head and chuckled. “My dear James, the Vow of Secrecy is already destroyed. It was shattered by the hand of your own friend and soul-mate, Petra Morganstern. Like it or not, you were instrumental in that act. You see, you have already begun to fulfil the role destiny has determined for you. Just as Harry Potter was instrumental to Albus Dumbledore, so are you destined to walk beside me, to help bring the wizarding world into its long-awaited golden age.”

James wanted to leave, to run, to find himself anywhere other than this room, surrounded by these mad, impossible words and that knowing, all-too-familiar face. Helplessly, he glanced aside at Nastasia. She sipped her tea and looked back at him mildly. Seeing no help there, James returned his attention to the Professor.

“This isn’t really you talking,” he said, trying to make sense of what was happening. “It’s the bits of Dumbledore he put into your head when you were a baby. The parts he knew were bad. You’re just... you’re just a golem.”

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Avior's face darkened as James spoke. "I'll thank you not to use my generosity against me, Mr. Potter," he said coolly. "I shared my history with you to prove my honesty. Not to provide you the illusion of leverage. Has it ever occurred to you that Albus Dumbledore was, in fact, right? Not the old man that befriended and used your father, but the young man that was my uncle? The friend and co-revolutionary of Gellert Grindelwald? It was Albus Dumbledore himself who coined the phrase 'for the greater good'. The man you revere once knew that wizardkind's true destiny was to rule. To rise to a rightful position of superiority over the Muggle world, not as a tyrant-- such as Lord Voldemort's mistake-- but as a shepherd. A guardian. And yes, a warden. This is both the burden and the glory of wizardkind. For the Muggles' benefit as well as ours. They need us, after all. We have thus far failed them. Young Dumbledore was right. Surely you must see this."

James was shaking his head slowly as Avior spoke, his brow furrowing. "Dumbledore changed his mind. He got older, wiser. He knew that if the wizarding world ever rose to power over Muggles, that power would become corrupted. Tyrants would take over. Nobody can handle that much control without abusing it."

"This is what you are taught," Avior nodded. "And as a rule, it is true. But there are a select few of us for whom such axioms do not apply. For this unique handful, it is our duty to *prove* the rule... by being its exception."

Nastasia nodded blithely. "Makes sense to me."

James turned toward her in disbelief, his eyes wide. She grinned at him and James saw the mean glint in her eye of her *other*-- Nasti. She winked at him.

"So it really is you, then," James said, speaking to Avior and standing once again, shoving a hand into his pocket for his wand. "You really are planning to set off some sort of magical super weapon at Hogwarts at the end of the year, attacking and killing a bunch of Muggle world leaders."

"Revolutions are simple math, Mr. Potter," Avior bowed his head sadly. "The winner is always the one willing to provide the right number of casualties. The Morrigan Web is a mysterious, dastardly weapon-- of that there is no doubt. But its black grandiosity is what makes it so effective. Better a single strike, cutting down all opposition at once, than an interminable war, rife with unintended victims, innocent bystanders,

and unfortunate human shields. This, after all, is how human leaders maintain the illusion of superiority: not by being the most powerful, but by hiding behind the most soldiers. If you think about it, my plan--targeting the leaders themselves, surgically, like the cancers that they are--is more than humane. It is our moral responsibility."

"You're completely bloody mad," James shook his head slowly. "You're not just planning to kill Muggle world leaders. You'll kill wizard leaders as well. The Minister of Magic himself will be there, as well as loads of other wizard presidents and kings and chancellors."

Avior nodded, grimacing. "Alas, the cancer has spread to the ranks of wizardkind as well, James. But even amongst wizards, government leaders are simply the tools in the hands of the populace. If a tool ceases performing its function, it must be destroyed, and replaced."

James backed away slightly, slowly, his right hand still buried in his robes, fisted on his wand. "The Morrigan Web," he said slowly. "Sure. All right, then. So tell me, if I am going to join you, work with you... what does it do? How does it work?"

Avior chuckled breezily. "There is a reason I had to destroy Mr. Worlick," he said, his eyes twinkling. "Even my greatest allies can become liabilities simply by knowing too much. Worlick knew very, very much. It was a shame to kill him, for he was an effective tool, but it was prudent and necessary. Had he been captured-- say, by your father James, as he already was once-- he might have revealed the very secrets you ask. Believe me, I am doing you a favour by not revealing to you the mysteries and secrets of the Morrigan Web. Besides, you do me a disservice. You do not mean to assist me, even now, but to find a weakness, to take advantage of me, to thwart me. I do not blame you for this. Alliances such as ours take time."

A thought occurred to James, creasing his brow as he looked directly at Avior. "How do you know all this? The Morrigan Web was created by some bloke in the United States-- some daft American wizard, using a bunch of Muggle slaves to gather his supplies. He's got to know all of your secrets, too, doesn't he? Are you planning on killing him as well? We've met him, and I've got a pretty good idea that killing him would be a lot harder than killing Worlick."

He'd expected Avior to be angry at this, or shocked and surprised. Instead, the old professor simply shook his head and laughed softly, closing his eyes again. "James, my boy, I admit I expected more from you."

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You are smart. I provided you with all of the necessary pieces. All you had to do was put them together. But perhaps I should not blame your wit. It takes more than mere intelligence to comprehend such cunning. In time, you may develop the proper skills, as Ms. Hendricks has done.”

Avior leaned forward now, meeting James’ gaze, his own eyes piercingly blue above his half-moon glasses. “Look closely at me, James. What do you see?”

James did look closely, squinting. As usual, he hadn’t brought his glasses. He shook his head vaguely.

“It is not unusual for witches and wizards to learn the art of the animagus,” Avior said, lowering his voice to a low rumble. “Your own Professor McGonagall has mastered this skill. She transforms herself into a common feline at will. I have simply taken this technique to the next level.”

He stood, removing his spectacles and tucking them into his robe. Still smiling, he withdrew his pointed hat from his head and dropped it unceremoniously to the chair behind him. “I have mastered the art of transfiguring myself into the most dangerous animal of them all...” His smile widened, showing all of his teeth. He spread his arms slowly. “The *human* animal.”

As he spoke, he *changed*. His narrow shoulders expanded. His thin arms grew round with muscle beneath his robes. His beard shortened, darkened, and shrank away to no more than a grey shadow on his cheeks and chin. But worst of all was his face. The kindly, wizened visage of Albus Dumbledore grew cold, chiselled, with cruel, sneering lips and eyes black as tar.

“I need not fear what my compatriot in the United States knows,” the Professor’s new face said with its deeper, gloating voice. “Because *I am he*. The Collector is my alter ego. My mask. It is the face I shall wear as I ascend to power in the United States, and soon after, the world.”

James nearly fell backwards onto the sofa. He steadied himself clumsily, unable to take his eyes away from the professor’s new, dark visage. “But...” he stammered, his voice suddenly very dry. “But, you sent monsters after us! You tried to kill us!”

“I did indeed,” the transformed figure said, bowing his head as if offering an apology for an accidental slight. “I was, perhaps, a bit rash. I invented the Collector as a sort of puppet, a decoy, but he has developed

rather a personality of his own. When I am in his guise, I admit, he occasionally gets the better of me. And yet, in my defence, I did not then know how important you might be to me, James. I did not respect the role you would play. Things are different now. I do beg your forgiveness as we forge our potential new alliance.”

“I won’t form *any* alliance with you,” James said, finally drawing his wand, shakily, from his robe. “I just won’t.”

The Collector looked pained. “That would be regrettable, James. Please, for your own sake, I beg you not to answer so quickly. History *will* repeat itself, but with subtle changes. Think back to the past: Albus Dumbledore was killed in the course of the last cycle, cut down by the wand of a friend disguised as an enemy. If you resist me-- if you attempt to stand in the path of destiny-- I fear this time *you* may be cut down by the wand of an enemy... disguised as a friend.”

James sensed movement out of the corner of his eye. He glanced aside and saw that Nastasia had stood as well. Her wand was out, pointed at him. The look on her face was regretful, but steady and unflinching. “Sorry, James,” she shrugged one shoulder. “I tried to tell you not to trust me. Really. I gave you *plenty* of warning.”

James shook his head, his confusion steadily overwhelmed by a sort of disgusted anger. “You’re *in* on this?”

She rolled her eyes impatiently. “Don’t get all high and mighty on me. I just figured it all out a few days before you did. The only difference between you and me is that I know the professor is right.”

“That’s a pretty major difference!” James spat, raising his own wand. “He nearly *killed* us in New Amsterdam!”

“Expeliarmus,” Nastasia called in a bored voice, flicking her wand at him. James’ wand wrenched out of his hand and spun through the air. Nastasia caught it deftly. “Wow,” she said, impressed with herself. “That was pretty good, wasn’t it? You totally should have seen that coming.”

“Power belongs to those unafraid to use it,” the Collector said approvingly, still standing before his armchair. “You could learn a lot from Ms. Hendricks, James. The Americans have always appreciated the inevitability of progress. Of course, she is helped very much by her family heritage. I recognized this immediately about her. Blood carries its own memories, and hers is a very rich blood indeed.”

James studied Nastasia’s face. “Nasti?”

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“That would be easier, wouldn’t it?” She smiled wanly, her wand still pointed unflinchingly at him. James was dismayed to see that this wasn’t some fractured half-version of Nastasia’s personality. This was all of her-- both Nasti and Ashya-- working together, if reluctantly. He backed further away from her, although he sensed it was no use. Behind him was bare stone wall, flanked by pillars. Across from him, the chamber entrance was guarded by the imposing clockwork figure of Tawil At-U’mr.

“All right,” James stammered quickly, glancing from Nastasia to the Collector. “What do you want?”

The Collector spread his hands, palms up. “All I want, James,” he smiled. “Is your consideration. Your patience. Your willingness to entertain the idea that I may, in fact, be right. You will find this difficult to believe, but I am not a bad man. I myself am simply a tool in the hand of destiny, fortunate enough to be available at this all-important, pivotal moment in history. What I desire from you is a decision: will you help take us forward into a new golden age of wizardkind? Or will you, like so many others, be crushed in the teeth of progress?”

As he spoke, the Collector turned aside, approaching the desk. “You see, James, there is no mechanism by which the cycle can be stopped this time. Forces beyond comprehension have aligned to assure this. Destiny is no longer a mute force, cold and distant. Destiny is now one of our tools-- a cord to be stretched and tied at will,” he glanced back at James, smiling conspiratorially, “a *Crimson Thread*, as it were, is very nearly within our grasp, ready to be sewn as we wish, forming a tapestry of our *own* design.”

James knew what the horrible figure was referring to. In his mind, he saw the mysterious Loom of Destinies in the cellar of Alma Aleron’s Archive, frozen in place, no longer weaving its magical, interminable tale of human history, all because of a single, stolen red thread. He heard the voice of Merlin, both grave and foreboding: *this changes everything...*

“The Crimson Thread,” he whispered. “The Lady of the Lake...”

The Collector ignored him. He turned back to the desk and, almost daintily, plucked a piece from the oversized chess board. It was one of the crystal knights. The tiny figure glimmered and sparkled in his hand. “Your choice, James,” he mused, staring at the chess piece, “is not whether to join me, or to attempt to stop me. There *is no* stopping me

now. The pieces are very nearly in place. The secrets of the Morrigan Web are safely hidden. The plan of months and years and centuries is now in motion. No, James. Your choice is to join me... or to die.”

The Collector’s words hung in the air like smoke, lingering, echoing in James’ head. Was he really being threatened with death? Right here, right now? He glanced toward Nastasia’s outstretched wand, then to her eyes. She offered him an impatient grimace and a minute shake of her head, as if to say *what are you waiting for, stupid?*

Across the room, a ruffle of fabric and a sudden movement caught James’ attention. A hand appeared in mid-air, hovering a few feet behind the Collector. The hand-- James recognized it as Albus’-- was fisted around a wand.

“Petrificus--” he called, his voice muffled beneath the Invisibility Cloak, and then, interrupting himself: “Ah bugger!”

There was a scuffle, a grunt, and Albus’ hand swung toward the floor, dropping his wand. James’ relief was replaced with annoyed frustration as both Albus and Rose tumbled out from beneath the Cloak, falling atop each other onto the stone floor.

The Collector did not turn around. “Amazing things, Invisibility Cloaks,” he commented idly. “But with the fatal flaw of being a constant tripping hazard. Ms. Hendricks, please assure that our new guests won’t cause any trouble.”

Nastasia rolled her eyes irritably and, cursing under her breath, summoned both Rose’s and Albus’ wands. They clacked against James’ as they flew into her hand.

“Welcome, my young friends,” the Collector announced, “I’d have offered you tea as well, but you seemed to be so enjoying your sense of secret adventure. Please, if you would just stand over there, we’ll be finished here quite soon.”

Rose made to throw herself upon Nastasia, but a mere wave of the Collector’s wand tossed her backwards, knocking Albus aside. Both tumbled messily to the floor next to the Jiskra’s giant birdcage.

“Stop it!” James cried, stepping forward again. “Leave them alone!”

Still holding the crystal knight in his left hand, the Collector looked back at James, his expression serious. “Let this be a lesson, Mr. Potter. Your decisions are never yours alone. The repercussions influence everyone around us. Your brother and cousin, for instance. But I know

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what you are thinking. You are thinking of your poor, unfortunate cousin Lucy.” He nodded slowly, his eyes unwavering. “She paid the ultimate price for your decisions, did she not? A pity you haven’t learned how to avoid such errors. Or have you? Be careful. Your next words will decide the course of many, many lives.”

But it was not James who spoke next. It was Albus. “Hey ‘Professor,’” he said, adopting his most churlish tone of voice. “You forgot. We Slytherins don’t *need* wands to cause trouble.”

James turned toward his brother, as did Nastasia and the Collector. Albus had both of his hands hooked into the framework of the Jiskra’s cage. With a hard grin, he heaved it over.

The cage toppled, crashed, and broke open. With an ear-splitting screech, the Jiskra burst out of it, seeming to immediately double in size as it reared, unfurling great leathery wings matted with red feathers. The two heads pivoted on goose-like necks, swivelling furiously, and locking fixedly onto Albus.

“Oh *bugger!*” Albus cried again, grabbing Rose and yanking her aside.

The Jiskra screeched, this time exhaling a directed spray of mist from one head. The other head spat a streak of white sparks, like a stone striking a flint. The sparks ignited the mist, which exploded into blue-orange flame.

James boggled as the flames filled the space where, only a moment before, Albus and Rose had been standing. Fire bloomed against the wall, lighting an enormous tapestry. A hand suddenly seized James’ wrist. He glanced up to see Nastasia, her wand lowered, her face wide-eyed and impatient, dragging him toward the fireplace.

“Come on, Cornelius!” she declared. “You want to become a permanent resident?”

The Collector strode forward, his wand raised. For the moment, however, he was distracted by the burning tapestry. A jet of water erupted from his wand, hissing against the flames.

“Al!” James cried, “Rose!”

Nastasia grabbed a small pot from the mantel over the fireplace: Floo Powder, of course. She heaved it into the fire, where it shattered.

“Jump!” she commanded, pulling James along with her.

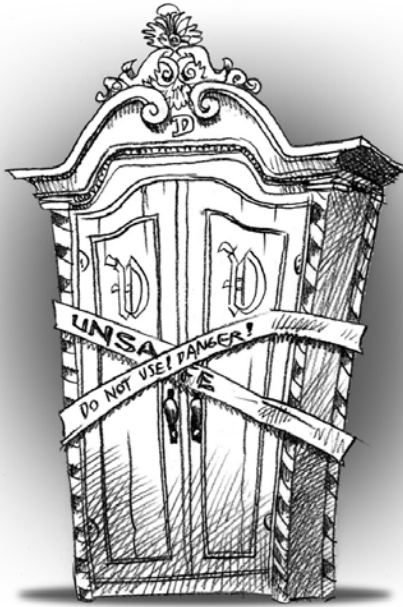
Green flames swirled around him as he half-leapt, half-fell into the hearth. Behind him, Rose screamed; Albus cursed; the Collector

roared. An instant later, the noise fell away, engulfed in spinning green flames.

Wherever James and Nastasia were headed, he could only hope that his cousin and brother had both the good sense and great fortune to follow.



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16. THE WOES OF FILCH

Something cold and hard reared up out of the fire and struck James, knocking the wind out of him. He tumbled, realizing he had fallen back out of green flames and onto a stone floor.

“Where are we” he panted, struggling to get to his feet, dizzy from the unexpected journey through the fireplace. “Are we back home?”

Nastasia scrambled upright next to him, glancing around. “We aren’t home,” she answered bluntly.

A circular wrought-iron stairway stood in front of them, leading up to a low balcony. Huge pots lined the narrow walkway above, trailing vines and over-sized leaves.

“We didn’t even leave Durmstrang!” James exclaimed. “We went to the last place Avior travelled from! His own classroom! Oof!”

He tumbled forward as another figure bowled into him, erupting from the green flames of the classroom’s fireplace. A fourth figure tackled all three of them, knocking the entire assembly to the floor in a messy heap.

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“Must go faster!” Albus panted in James’ ear. “Run! Go, go, *go!*” He clambered upright, planting a knee in James’ back as he went.

Rose screamed again, much closer this time, as the green fire flared once more. A large, complicated shape exploded from the hearth, trailing flames and screeching monstrously. The Jiskra landed directly behind James, its wings flapping for balance, its twin heads swivelling. It spied him with its four beady eyes and reared.

James rolled frantically aside, barely avoiding the blast of liquid fire. Hands grabbed at him, dragging him to his feet as the Jiskra scrambled forward, wings flailing, struggling for flight.

Footsteps clanked on the iron stairs as Albus pounded up, followed by Rose, Nastasia and, stumbling in the rear, James. Claws scabbled at the railings as the Jiskra lurched up after them, half-flying, screeching with both of its heads.

“Wands!” Albus cried, scrambling onto the balcony. “Nastasia! Give us our bloody wands!”

“No time!” Nastasia exclaimed. “I don’t even know whose are whose!”

A burst of fire boiled up through the wrought iron balcony floor, singing the leaves of the Yuxa Baslatma plants. The Jiskra followed, mounting the balcony railing and launching into the air. It flapped overhead, flailing and snatching at the ducking students with its claws.

“Ow!” Rose exclaimed, tripping amongst the plants. “I’m caught!”

James clambered to a halt behind her, seeing that Rose had, indeed, become enmeshed in the trailing, flowering vines of the plants. He grabbed her arm and pulled fiercely, dragging her forward. The vines tugged back, popping and ripping free of their pot, trailing tendrils of dirt-choked roots.

“What are you waiting for?” Albus called impatiently, tramping down the second stairway. “We’re nearly there!” He pointed toward the open double doors below, and the corridor beyond.

James gave one more grunting tug on Rose’s arm, pulling her free of the Yuxa plant just as the Jiskra swooped overhead again, spraying a trail of flame. Rose’s hair and robes caught fire and she screamed once again, flailing helplessly. James grabbed his cousin and flung his own robe over her, damping the flames. Next to him, he realized with some shock, Nastasia was doing the same. Her own pink hair was singed and smoking.

The Jiskra screeched furiously, circling back.

Nastasia herded Rose ahead of her as they pelted between the plants. They reached the second stairway and began to scramble down. A shadow fell over them, and James turned back to see the Jiskra filling his vision, its wings spread, its red claws and glinting black talons extended.

He did the first thing that came to his mind: he lunged forward and grabbed the Jiskra's legs with both hands, narrowly avoiding its hooked talons. The great bird screeched, lurched forward off-balance, thrashed its wings, and crashed heavily onto the potted Yuxa Baslatma plants, knocking several of them over. They crashed to the floor below, shattering their ancient pots like bombs.

James refused to let go of the Jiskra's struggling, scaly legs, even as it drug him backwards, screeching and flailing back into the air. It pulled him with it, tumbling him right over the ledge of the balcony. James feet swung down wildly over the classroom tables, weighing the great bird down. It flapped frantically, fighting to stay in the air, but finally failed, bashing against the opposite balcony and flinging James off. He fell between the desks, knocking chairs in every direction. Miraculously unhurt, he lunged aside, hiding under a table as the bird landed atop it with a heavy thump, breathing a gout of furious, boiling fire.

Shoving chairs aside, James crawled frantically beneath the tables, angling toward the classroom's open doors. Ahead of him, he saw Albus, Rose and Nastasia running, entering the torchlight of the corridor. Rose skidded to a halt and looked back, her eyes wild, her hair trailing smoke. After only a moment's terrified hesitation, she lunged back, reaching for James as he scrambled from beneath the last table.

"Rose, no!" he cried, trying to bat her away. "Run!"

"Shut up, you great idiot!" she shouted. "I'm trying to save you!"

"I don't *need* saving!"

"You sure could have fooled me!"

Stumbling to his feet, James hurtled toward the open doors, pulled along by Rose. A shape blew over them, covering them with flying grit and hot breath. They slid to a halt as the Jiskra slammed down in front of them, blocking both doors with its spread wings. Its beaks gnashed and screeched, snapping forward.

James grabbed Rose, tried to shove her behind him, but it was too late. The Jiskra reared, filling its chest to spray one final blast of flame.

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Something struck it from behind, hard enough to knock it forward. Both heads bashed against the stone floor, exhaling violently but harmlessly in two directions. Great leathery wings clapped down, spreading on the floor like enormous, dirty fans.

Behind the stunned Jiskra, framed in the open doorway, were both Albus and Nastasia, wands raised.

“This isn’t even my wand!” Albus suddenly exclaimed, raising the wand and examining it critically. “This is Rose’s! Bloody hell, I just used a girl’s wand.”

“It won’t stay down long,” James said, pulling Rose forward. “Come on!”

Together, they leapt over the Jiskra, barely missing the feathery plume of its tail. It was already stirring, beginning to push itself upright.

Pelting as fast as they could, the four students navigated the corridors, threading their way back to the tower roof and the waiting Vanishing Cabinet. Durmstrang students clambered out of the way, cursing back at them angrily, but only for a moment, since the Jiskra was still chasing them, hurtling along through the corridors like a great red kite, bouncing off the walls, screeching and shredding tapestries with its talons.

As one, James, Rose, Albus and Nastasia hurled themselves into the Cabinet, nearly knocking it over entirely. The door clapped shut behind them, sealing them gratefully, if uncomfortably, in its cramped confines.

A flash and a thump later, the four tumbled out onto the floor before the Slytherin table in the Hogwarts Great Hall.

“Ow!” Albus complained. “James, get off my head, you big bampot!”

Clumsily, Rose, Nastasia and James extricated themselves from the heap, pulling Albus upright with them. James looked up to see the Great Hall filled with students, all staring blankly at them, interrupted in the midst of the evening meal. In the rear of the hall, Filch raised his chin and fingered his cane, obviously trying to stifle a mean grimace. Next to James, Rose’s hair was still smoking. Vines were twisted around her sleeves. Albus’ face was smeared with Jiskra soot. All of them bore scratches and torn clothing from the Jiskra’s slashing talons.

“May I ask,” a strident female voice spoke up behind James, “just *what* you four are up to?”

James turned guiltily on the spot, spying Professor McGonagall. She had arisen to her feet at the head table. Next to her, the headmaster's chair was empty.

"We--" James began, but was interrupted as the Durmstrang Vanishing Cabinet exploded next to him.

The green polished door shattered, spraying planks in every direction as a monstrous red shape rocketed through it, screeching and crashing extravagantly onto the Slytherin table. Screams filled the air as panicked Slytherins lurched backwards, climbing over each other to escape the smashing crockery, flying silverware, and in the midst of it all, the rearing, thrashing shape of the Jiskra.

"Oh bugger it all to hell and back!" Albus cried helplessly, brandishing the wand in his hand once again. "*Stupefy!*"

The red spell missed the great bird, exploding instead against a window and shattering it.

The Great Hall erupted into chaos. Half of the assembly fled toward the main doors while the other half milled confusedly in their way, unsure of what was happening. Obviously overwhelmed and frantic, the Jiskra scabbled along the Slytherin table, smashing more crockery and flailing its wings, finally hurling itself into the air over the heads of terrified, scrambling students.

James grabbed his wand back from Nastasia and joined Albus in attempting to Stun the great bird as it soared toward the enchanted ceiling, spraying fire and screaming terribly. Hundreds of the Great Hall's floating candles bashed and broke before the Jiskra as it circled, swooping low and setting the tablecloths aflame.

More spells joined James' and Albus', streaking overhead in jets of red, green and yellow, striking the rafters and spraying magical sparks like fireworks. The Jiskra's flight path, however, was too crazed and random to allow accurate aiming. It streaked low again, swooping over the head table. Professor Flitwick leapt atop the table and ran after the great red beast, peppering it with freezing charms. Behind him, Professors McGonagall and Debellows fired their own wands, sending protective spells over the fleeing, rioting students and putting out the many fires.

Amidst it all, the ghost of the Bloody Baron chased the Jiskra, swooping wildly and thrashing his phantasmic sword.

"I've got it!" Albus cried, leaping atop the detritus of the Slytherin table and waving his wand. "I've got it! One more shot!"

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A shadow hurtled over him and a great red claw snatched the wand from his hand. With a sharp CRACK the Jiskra broke the wand in two, tossing the pieces across the Great Hall. With a vicious screech, it circled back, aiming for Albus with its twin snaking heads.

“It’s got me!” Albus exclaimed, his eyes widening. “It’s got me! Get out of the way!”

He made to leap off the table, but the crowd was too thick, milling and screaming and firing random spells into the air.

James made to grasp at his brother’s robes, to pull him down and out of the Jiskra’s reach, but a huge, dark figure suddenly moved in front of him, completely blocking his path. The figure smelled vaguely of barn and wet leather.

“Gotcha!” the figure bellowed jovially, grunting with sudden effort. A wash of gritty air and flying debris blasted over James as the Jiskra thrashed its wings, suddenly held in place by a pair of enormous, ham-like hands.

It was Hagrid, of course, smiling despite everything, his beetle-black eyes filled with twinkling joy. “Wellnow, who might yeh be my little pet?” he said, as if he had just caught a kitten by the paws rather than a monstrous firebeast by its thrashing wings. The Jiskra reared and spat a blast of flame at Hagrid’s face, but Hagrid ducked, raising the bird overhead so that its torch billowed over the tables, melting more of the floating candles into a rain of wax.

“Yer a lively one, aincha?” Hagrid chided, laughing.

“Hagrid!” Professor McGonagall called, her voice cracked and shaking with rage. “Please take that creature out of the Great Hall immediately!”

“Yes ma’am, Professor,” Hagrid agreed, still obviously beside himself with happiness. “I’ve got jus’ the place for yeh, don’t I then? I bet yeh’d like a nice hot bowl o’ turpentine, wouldn’t yeh? Why, yer prob’ly plum tapped out by now, aincha?”

The Jiskra screeched again, coughing a weak blast of flame and thrashing its wings in Hagrid’s meaty fists. Hagrid seemed to take this as friendly enthusiasm. He was still chuckling and coddling the beast as he ducked through the Great Hall’s entrance.

In the ringing silence that followed, James took in the state of the Hall. Night breeze blew merrily through several shattered windows, playing in the crackling fires that dotted the tables. Smashed crockery and

scattered silverware littered the tables and floor. Broken candles spun and drifted in all directions. All around, muttering and swearing and cursing, students were getting to their feet and climbing from beneath tables. In the centre of it all, his eyes flaming with rage and his sallow cheeks pale as chalk, Argus Filch stood speechless, his cane gripped in a hard, white-knuckled fist.

Albus was still atop the Slytherin table, crouched with both hands over his head. Slowly he relaxed.

“Shame about your wand,” Nastasia commented as he clambered down.

“Oh, well that’s the least of our problems,” he muttered shakily and offered a weak smile. “Besides,” he added, “I was still using Rose’s.”

“Students,” Professor McGonagall announced sternly. “All of you, the excitement is over. If any of you are hurt, please assist one another to the hospital wing. If you cannot, please speak up for yourselves and those around you.”

James glanced around. Amazingly, despite the wreckage, no one seemed particularly hurt.

“In that case,” McGonagall went on, “please return to your common rooms and go about your business. We have quite a mess to attend to, it seems.” This last she said with a pronounced frown, glaring down at James, Albus, Rose and Nastasia. “The four of you, in my office. Now.”

“Professor,” Filch wheezed, approaching the head table at a shambling run. “Leave them to me, if you please. I’ll handle the appropriate punishments.”

“Yes you shall, I am quite sure,” McGonagall concurred. “But not until after I have interviewed them and ascertained precisely how this fiasco managed to occur. Please, step aside, Mr. Filch.”

“Discipline is my responsibility, Professor,” Filch insisted, nearly vibrating with rage. “And never in all my years have I witnessed students more in need of discipline!”

“Oh, I daresay your enthusiasm has gotten the better of you, Argus,” McGonagall said, lowering her voice wearily. “I recall a certain swamp that occupied an entire corridor for many months, conjured by a pair of rather inspired young Weasleys. As remarkable as this is, it does bear the hallmark of an accident rather than a deliberate act.”

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“Carelessness is its own crime, Professor!” Filch exclaimed, spitting with vehemence. “Allow me to perform my duty!”

“Mr. Filch, your *duty* is to see that this Hall is restored to functioning condition by morning,” McGonagall declared, rising to her full height. “Or have you forgotten what it is this school actually pays you for?”

Filch was undeterred, steady in his furious conviction. “But the Headmaster has--”

“The Headmaster is not currently here, as you can see, which leaves me quite capably in charge. You’ve had a long and storied career with this school, Mr. Filch. I would hate to be the one responsible for sacking you.”

Filch gasped and took a step backward, his eyes narrowing. “You wouldn’t dare. The Headmaster--”

“Would surely hire you back,” she nodded tersely. “But you and I both know that headmasters do not always last long in this day and age. You would do well to remember who your *long-term* allies are, Argus. Some of us have very long memories indeed.”

Filch glared at the Professor, his eyes still narrowed menacingly. Finally, he lowered his black cane, letting it clack to the floor. “As you wish, Professor,” he growled. “But I will be awaiting these three, at least, when you are through with them.” He eyed James, Rose and Albus beadily. “You daresn’t deny me my duty. In the meantime... I shall attend to my *other* duties.”

He nodded and backed away, letting his gaze sweep over the ruined hall.

McGonagall drew a great, deep breath, as if forcibly calming herself. “Whatever you four have to say for yourselves,” she muttered darkly, “it had better be *exceptionally* impressive.”



Students were still milling about in front of the staircase by the time Professor McGonagall led James, Albus and Rose out of the Great Hall, having sent Nastasia back to Alma Aleron with a curt warning that she would be speaking by Floo to Chancellor Franklyn within the hour. James was significantly disgruntled by this-- after what had happened at Durmstrang, he did not feel that Nastasia could be trusted at all, and was eager to demand some immediate answers from her-- but the look on Professor McGonagall's face brooked no argument. Thus, for now, James resigned himself to simply following her and, once they reached her office, telling her everything that had happened. McGonagall stalked past a snoring suit of armour and into the narrow corridor which led to the staff offices, maintaining her usual long, swift gait and leaving the students trotting to keep pace. As she reached a bend in the corridor, however, she stopped abruptly and looked back over her shoulder.

Albus, who had been following close behind the professor, skidded to a halt. Rose bumped into him, interrupting the half-whispered row they'd been having about Rose's broken wand.

James looked up at Professor McGonagall, but she was not looking back at him. Rather, she peered over his head, at the receding corridor behind him. Apparently satisfied with what she saw, she turned toward a broad, closed door emblazoned with brass letters that spelled out the words TEACHER'S LOUNGE. The professor tapped the L with her wand, causing it to spin upside down, as if loose on its screw. Leaving it that way, she pocketed her wand and stalked onward again.

"Er," Rose ventured, pushing Albus aside and trotting to catch up to Professor McGonagall. "Isn't your office just back there, Professor? Across from the teacher's lounge?"

"Hush and keep up," McGonagall muttered sternly, offering no further explanation.

Nervously, Rose glanced back at James and Albus.

After yet another bend in the corridor, Professor McGonagall stopped once more. Without looking back this time, she stepped into a shallow alcove, shimmied behind a statue of a very fat wizard wearing a ruff the size of a lorry tire, and disappeared into a low, hidden doorway.

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Albus paused for a moment, examining the secret doorway. He glanced back at the others, eyes wide, and then ducked behind the statue and into the doorway. Curious and intrigued, Rose and James followed.

The doorway led to a very narrow, very dark stairway angling up between blank stone walls. The glowing halo of Professor McGonagall's lit wand bobbed high above, following the sounds of her clacking footsteps.

"I never knew there was a secret passage here," Albus whispered, impressed.

McGonagall's voice echoed back, hushed in the darkness. "That is because there wasn't. Not until two months ago. I trust that I need not explain to any of you why its secrecy must remain intact."

The stairs went on much further and higher than James thought possible. Finally, the stairs stopped at a shallow landing and a blank wall. With her wand still lit, McGonagall tapped the wall in three places, leaving each brick glowing faintly. After a moment, a dull rumble of scraping stone echoed from the landing and the bricks folded apart, revealing a door. Hurriedly, McGonagall stepped through, leaving the door open behind her. The three students hastened in her wake.

As James emerged from the door, a wave of vertigo seized his stomach, weakening his knees for one brief, but tense moment. The doorway had opened into the throat of a very deep, circular chasm, lined with rickety wooden steps. Carefully, James leaned against the railing in front of him and peered up, observing the spiral of stairs that led higher into lofty darkness.

"Where is this?" Albus whispered, following the Professor as she marched heedlessly up the creaking stairs. "I've never seen this part of the castle before."

James knew where they were, but couldn't make any sense of it. "We're climbing up to the Sylvven Tower, I think."

"Oooh!" Rose enthused. "I've always wanted to see that! It's one of the oldest parts of the whole castle, you know! One of the few remaining bits from before it was even a school! But..." She paused and frowned. "Why are we going up there now?"

James shook his head worriedly. "Last time I was here," he said, almost to himself, "I was duelling Salazar Slytherin."

"Hiding while *he* duelled *you*, more like it," Albus rolled his eyes.

“Hurry, you three,” McGonagall called down, still keeping her voice hushed. “We have very little time before everyone else arrives.”

Rose’s eyes widened. “Everyone else?” she repeated.

“Do as she says,” James urged, pushing his cousin up the leaning, creaking staircase.

The inside of the tower grew darker and hotter as they climbed, until, after what seemed like several minutes, they reached a low room, surrounded by narrow windows. Set into the room’s ceiling was a closed trapdoor. McGonagall approached this, unlocked it with her wand, and heaved it open. Finally, she climbed the last, steep stairway up into pale blue moonlight. One by one, James, Rose and Albus followed.

The Sylvven Tower looked the same as always, and yet, as always, exuded an air of solemnity and ancient purpose. It’s circular, terraced steps led away and up to a low wall, beyond which stretched the seamless depths of the night sky, dusted with stars and studded with grey, drifting clouds. The moon was a high sickle, casting inky shadows beneath the twin stone thrones that faced each other across the Tower’s floor. McGonagall approached one of the thrones, turned, and sat upon it, heaving a great, heavy sigh.

“This, as you can plainly see,” she said briskly, “is not my office. I believe it shall come as no surprise to you that my office, indeed every office in this castle, is subject to eavesdropping. We have not yet learned how this is being accomplished, as no amount of counter-spying charms has alleviated the problem. We only know that when we convene here, atop the Sylvven Tower, our counsels do not seem to find their way into the wrong ears. We have tested and confirmed this to our satisfaction. So...” She paused, frowned, and raised her chin. “Mr. Potter--” she caught herself, remembering that there were two Potters present, “*James* Potter: if you please, explain yourself as briefly as possible. And might I add, if this was simply one of your Gremlins pranks gone awry, I swear I will turn you over to Mr. Filch and instruct him do his very worst.”

James glanced briefly from Albus to Rose, and then turned his attention back to the Professor. “It all started at the beginning of the school term,” he began, “when I started having some suspicions about one of the professors at Durmstrang...” As briefly as he could, he attempted to explain Professor Avior’s connection to the long dead Albus Dumbledore, leading to his plan to attack the upcoming world summit of

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wizard and Muggle leaders. Albus and Rose interjected occasionally, adding details or backtracking to explain things he'd forgotten.

"It was him that killed Worlick," Rose supplied. "We saw somebody leaving the body, and James confirmed it was Avior when he saw him down by the White Tomb."

"And we found a newspaper clipping on Worlick's body," James added. "It was a *Daily Prophet* story about the big Quidditch Summit here at Hogwarts, with all the Muggle and wizarding leaders. That's where the attack is going to take place! Avior pretty much admitted it!"

"Not to mention the fact," Albus piped up, "that Avior and that Collector bloke are one and the same person. He can turn into him by transfiguration, just like you turn into a cat, Professor. He actually mentioned you as an example!"

"And the Collector is just another name for the man who's become the new American Vice President!" Rose interrupted. "He's no Muggle at all! He's planning to have the American president killed off at the Quidditch Summit so he can assume his place!"

As the three spoke, sometimes overriding each other in their urgency, Professor McGonagall merely watched, her expression tense and unreadable. Her eyes flicked from speaker to speaker until, finally, all three fell silent.

After a nervous pause, Rose asked, "You believe us, don't you Professor?"

McGonagall closed her eyes wearily. "Belief does not come into it, Ms. Weasley. These are monstrous allegations, not to mention a frankly preposterous tale about a legendary headmaster, and yet I've known too many Potters and Weasleys in my tenure to simply dismiss them. We shall investigate these matters in great detail, of that you can be sure."

A surge of relief welled in James, loosening the cords of worry and tension that had been cinched tightly around his chest ever since his interview with Avior. He suddenly felt very tired.

"Durmstrang Academy is a school which greatly values its secrets," McGonagall went on, frowning thoughtfully. "Very little is known about its practices and methods and especially its staff. It is, quite frankly, the perfect home for someone with much to hide. Still," she focussed on James again. "It is a far stretch to believe that Albus Dumbledore could not have found this individual had he a mind to. And

more importantly, it was criminally irresponsible of you to approach this Professor Avior on your own.”

“Professor,” James began, but McGonagall overrode him, getting to her feet.

“After everything you’ve witnessed,” she said sternly. “All three of you, to take such a risk was perilously foolhardy. Have you no idea what is at stake?”

“We didn’t think he was *dangerous* exactly,” Rose explained. “We just thought he was dodgy. We didn’t think he would try to hurt anyone.”

“You didn’t think at all,” McGonagall scolded, her voice low and grave. “There may be a time for youthful expeditions of adventure. Believe it or not, I was young once myself, and am not yet old enough to forget my own flirtations with mischief. But this is no longer that time. It is more than your personal safety at stake. Some of the best teachers of this school-- and the strongest allies of its charges-- are already gone. The few who remain are rendered nearly powerless. You were with us all this past holiday, so you have no excuse. Your actions are no longer merely a risk to yourselves, but to all of us.”

“The Order of the Phoenix,” Albus sighed.

“Don’t even say it aloud,” McGonagall warned, lowering her head and covering her eyes with one thin, wrinkled hand. Suddenly, to James’ eyes, the professor did not look like an imposing force of authority. She looked disconcertingly like an old, rather tired woman. “I have no choice but to turn you over to Mr. Filch for punishment.”

“But Professor,” James exclaimed again, and was once again overruled.

“You will accept your punishments without a word of complaint,” she insisted, dropping her hand and glaring back at him. “It is the least of your concerns at the moment, regardless of how it may seem to you. Do I make myself quite clear?”

James deflated. “Yes Ma’am.”

“Yes Ma’am,” Rose concurred. Next to her, Albus merely fumed silently.

McGonagall softened. “I should have retired at the end of my time as Headmistress,” she mused with a shake of her head. “Tend to my garden. Finish my memoirs. Smoke my pipe. Anything but this.”

Rose spoke in a small voice, “We’re sorry, Professor.”

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McGonagall sighed briskly. “Don’t apologize, Ms. Weasley. In truth-- and you will likely never hear me admit this again-- it is the mischief-makers who manage to save the world every time. I didn’t always believe that, but experience is a persistent teacher. Ah, and here come the others.”

Footsteps creaked on the stairs below the trapdoor as more figures approached. James turned toward the sound, as did Rose and Albus. Obviously, McGonagall’s turning of the letter on the Teacher’s Lounge door was a signal, calling the other members of the Order to meet. He wondered who would be first to arrive: Professor Flitwick? Debellowes? Perhaps even Trelawney?

But it was another face entirely that emerged, grinning thinly, from the trapdoor.

McGonagall saw the ascending figure and all the colour fell from her face. “Mr. Filch. What are you doing here?”

Filch did not answer, but the figure behind him did. “Do not blame the caretaker, Madame Professor,” a cracked, gravelly voice said. “I requested that he keep abreast of your whereabouts, if only so that I might know where to find you if it became necessary.”

“I presume it ‘became necessary’,” McGonagall said, holding her ground as Headmaster Grudje stepped past Filch into the moonlight.

Grudje peered around the Tower’s terraces and low walls. “An odd place, I admit, to interview misbehaving students, Madame Professor,” he commented.

McGonagall’s face remained perfectly stoic. “Perhaps you think so, Headmaster. I find it quite pleasant.”

“I find it quite *suspicious*, Professor,” Grudje admitted plainly, raising his thin, grey eyebrows. “And I add it to a long list of things I find suspicious about you, Madame. With all due respect, I wonder if you are ill-equipped to function under my leadership. Has it occurred to you that you have outlived your effectiveness at this school?”

McGonagall’s face hardened, turning her gaze into a flinty stare. “I don’t believe for a moment that it is my *effectiveness* you are concerned with, sir,” she said, all pretence abandoned. “But my *usefulness*. And I admit I have never been particularly interested in being useful to such as you.”

“Quite the contrary, Madame,” Grudje said, reaching into his robes and producing a thin scroll. “You do not content yourself with

being disagreeable, but with being actively subversive. I see that I have procured this not a moment too soon.”

He held the scroll out to her, but she did not accept it. He sighed, and unrolled the scroll himself.

“Be it known’,” he read pedantically. “That by the general agreement of its body of governors, Madame Minerva McGonagall is heretofore relieved of her post as professor and instructor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, effective immediately. In light of her many years of service, she shall continue to be a valued and respected regent of academic excellence and shall receive a severance compensation equivalent to no less than seventy per cent of her current contract’, etcetera, etcetera...” He re-rolled the scroll and sighed regretfully. “You should know, Madame, that it was I who negotiated your severance. I believe you will find it quite fair.”

“And this is what you call ‘leadership’,” McGonagall said, her nostrils flaring. “Not winning over those who disagree with you, but removing them outright.”

“I have done my best, Madame,” Grudje explained patiently. “But these are difficult times. I am sorry you disapprove of my methods. Unfortunately, with so much at stake in the magical world, we simply can no longer afford the luxury of dissent. But truly, your years of service are appreciated.” He gestured toward the open trapdoor. “Please, Madame McGonagall. Mr. Filch will accompany you to your quarters. Your replacement will be here within the hour. My apologies for such a necessarily swift departure, but we do have a school to run.”

McGonagall did not move to the trapdoor. Instead, she turned back to James, Rose and Albus. “I am sorry,” she said firmly. “Do carry on. I will see you soon enough.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t fear for the welfare of these three,” Grudje smiled. “They are in the very capable hands of myself and Mr. Filch. Believe it or not, even without your presence, Madame McGonagall, Hogwarts prevails.”

“After you, *Madame*,” Filch simpered, still grinning meanly and brandishing his black cane. Finally, grudgingly, McGonagall stalked toward the trapdoor, leaving Filch limping in her wake.

James watched her go with mounting dread. Within seconds, he, Albus and Rose were alone in the moonlight with only Headmaster Grudje, who seemed strangely disinterested in them.

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“Return to your common rooms, students,” he ordered calmly. “Mr. Filch will seek you out soon enough. Until then, perhaps it will serve you to think upon what has happened here tonight. Surely there is some lesson to be learned here?”

None of them answered. Even Albus kept his tongue. Silently, hastily, they tramped down the stairs, fleeing the headmaster’s blank, bored gaze.

“I don’t believe he sacked Professor McGonagall!” Rose finally rasped, panting as they made their way down the spiralling staircase.

“We can only hope she’s able to pass on what we told her,” James said. “If she tells dad and the rest of the Order…”

Despite this meager hope, by the time they made their way back to the Entrance Hall, James felt somehow darker and more disheartened than he ever had in his life.

“Goodnight, Albus,” Rose sighed as Albus turned toward the descending staircase. He shook his head irritably and clumped down without a backward glance.

Rose paused, watching him go and leaning heavily on the ascending bannister. “I can’t believe she’s gone,” she said again, faintly.

James frowned. “She’ll be back. She has to be. What’s Hogwarts without Professor McGonagall?”

“He called her ‘*Madame* McGonagall’. I don’t know. It just sounds so... *final*.”

James grimaced wearily. “He’s a bad guy. Bad guys never win in the end.”

Rose looked aside at him, her hair hanging limp around her face. “How can you be so sure? I mean, look around. Seems as if the bad guys are doing pretty well for themselves at the moment.”

James didn’t have an immediate answer to that. Slowly, shoulders slumped, the pair began to climb the stairs. As they reached the landing and angled toward the portrait of the Fat Lady, James spoke again.

“It’s like the chess board in Avior’s office,” he suggested. “No one can really predict how it’s going to end by looking at it in the middle of the game.”

“Perhaps,” Rose agreed doubtfully, and then stopped, realizing that James had halted a step behind her. “What is it?”

“Avior’s chess board,” he said, frowning. “All those pieces... they seemed to represent real people.”

Rose nodded. “Yes. When he talked about you, he held up one of the knights. And there was a piece that looked like Petra-- the one you said was the Lady of the Lake. And the king was the Collector, who we now know *is* Avior. And the other king was Uncle Harry, your dad.” Rose gasped suddenly. “And the white queen... she looked a little bit like... like my mum!”

But James was shaking his head. He raised his eyes to meet his cousin’s. “No, Rose,” he said, quietly but firmly. “It wasn’t your mum.”

Rose furrowed her brow in confusion. “But I saw it. It had her hair, her face, but... *younger* somehow, maybe.”

“Rose, that wasn’t your mum,” James persisted. “It was *you*.”

Rose frowned incredulously, but seemed to give the idea a moment’s thought. “But why would it be me? What can I do? I mean... the queen?”

James shrugged helplessly, and then glanced down at his cousin’s robes. They were still matted with broken vines and fragments of flowers from her tussle with the Yuxa Baslatma plants. “Maybe those will help, somehow.”

Rose glanced down. “No way,” she said firmly. “We don’t even know which one of these came from what plant. They all do something different, you know. I don’t fancy accidentally finding out how I’m going to die, or worse, who I’m going to marry! Besides, after what happened to you when you took one, I’m not about to risk permanent madness! What if I can’t fall asleep in eleven minutes? What if the effects kick in while I’m still awake and turn my mind into hallucinogenic pudding?”

“Calm down,” James rolled his eyes, passing her and approaching the Portrait of the Fat Lady. “Blimey, it was just an idea.”

“After tonight,” Rose grouched, “I’ve just about had it with your ideas. These things are trouble,” she tugged at one of the vines, tearing it free of her robe. “I’m locking these away where they’ll be safe. If Professor Longbottom ever gets back to the greenhouses I’ll give them to him, maybe.”

James nodded and sighed deeply. “*If* professor Longbottom ever gets back.”

He had to admit, after tonight, that seemed like a very big “if” indeed.



The next few weeks were a time of surreal contrasts.

Despite his awareness of the impending attack, James found himself buried in the far more prosaic hustle and bustle of lessons, study, and interminable heaps of homework. It was impossible not to think that this was by design-- Headmaster Grudje made no effort to hide his belief that a busy student had no time for mischief. James, Ralph, Rose and Scorpius, however, secretly agreed that it was more than an effort to curb stinging spells and Dung Bombs. Grudje's homework policies, they felt quite sure, were meant to stifle complaints about the school's increasing lack of privacy, Draconian discipline policies, and nearly absurd security measures.

As summer crept over the school grounds, coaxing the grass to a lush green and combing it with warm, butterfly-laden breezes, new rules were handed down prohibiting the delivery of newspapers and magazines, and restricting all outgoing post to urgent matters.

"Any news that is fit to tell," Grudje explained from the head table at breakfast one Tuesday morning, putting on one of his sickly, completely unnatural smiles, "You may trust myself and your professors to pass on to you. In the meantime, consider yourselves free to devote your full and appropriate attention to the far more important matter of your studies."

On top of this, Hogsmeade weekends were cancelled for the remainder of the year. This, even more than the restricted post, inspired a wave of mutinous rabble-rousing among the students. Unfortunately, Grudje had also instituted a school-wide ban on all unofficial meetings of three or more students, citing an ancient rule about revolutionary cabals. This, he vowed with an utterly transparent display of feigned regret, was a "temporary but necessary measure in a time of international stress".

“It’s like he’s *trying* to force us to revolt,” Graham Warton seethed as he, Deirdre Finnegan and James stumped their way to Charms. “The more we obey his stupid rules, the more he piles them on.”

“Well, count me out of any revolts,” Deirdre muttered. “I’m not facing Filch and his stupid cane one more time. He’s twisted as a corkscrew, and twice as mean. I’ll face expulsion before anymore of his sadistic punishments.”

James moaned. “Don’t remind me. We still haven’t gotten our punishment for that whole disaster with the Jiskra and the Durmstrang cabinet. I think Filch is just letting us stew while he thinks up something especially vicious.”

“Break it up, you three,” Professor Shert called from the doorway of the Arithmancy classroom as they passed.

James dropped behind Graham and Deirdre, fuming impotently under his breath.

The one good thing to come from the fiasco with the Jiskra was that all classes at Durmstrang had been cancelled until the Durmstrang Cabinet could be repaired. While the cabinet itself had been easily reassembled, the magic that allowed it to serve as a portal had been much more severely damaged, rendering it unstable and dangerous for use. James had observed Professor Flitwick and his sixth year assistant, Slytherin Gwynn Hemlock, testing it between mealtimes in the Great Hall, attempting to send teapots through the cabinet, with little success.

“Oh dear me,” Flitwick was heard to proclaim as the door opened once more. He sighed. “No point attempting to *reparo* this one again. Seven times is the limit. *Accio* broom and dustpan, and please ask the house elves if they have any more teapots.”

Meanwhile, Hagrid was thoroughly enjoying his temporary custody of the Jiskra, making it the subject of his Care of Magical Creatures class, much to the mingled curiosity and trepidation of the students.

“Ancient creature, the Jiskra,” he said fondly, stroking the heads in turn. The Jiskra preened beneath Hagrid’s huge hand, raising the feathered hackles on its heads and flexing its wings. “Why Ed here is almost as old as the dinosaurs.”

James choked for a moment, nearly dropping his handful of damp, acrid-smelling wood shavings. “*Ed?*”

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“Well I had ter give ‘im a name, didn’ I?” Hagrid chuckled. “O’course it’s just temp’rary, while he stays here. I expect he’s got a diff’rent name back with ‘is friends at Durmstrang.”

This admission clouded Hagrid’s face for a moment as he pet the Jiskra. For its own part, the lizardy bird hissed and ruffled its greasy red feathers. James was glad to see that, despite Hagrid’s fondness for the creature, it was chained to its perch with a tiny silver cuff around one leg.

“As I was sayin’”, Hagrid went on, shaking himself. “Ancient creature, the Jiskra, and when I say ancient I don’ mean as a species. I mean this partic’lar specimen. The Jiskra’s called a Black Phoenix for a reason, see. Why, Ed here barely ages at all until he hits three hundred years old or so. Then he starts ter shrink, ter lose ‘is feathers, ter get all wrinkled and ancient looking. The centuries all fall on ‘im at once, yeh see, making ‘im look like the most pathetic thing yeh’ve ever seen. Then, Ed builds a nest for himself somewhere secret, usually in the deepest swamps or on top o’ cliffs and such, and he lies down there an’ makes an egg for himself. After eleven days in that egg, Ed pops back out again as a chick, with ‘is aging clock reset right back to zero.”

“You mean,” Trenton Bloch clarified, stepping forward as Hagrid beckoned him. “This thing is, like, super old? Thousands of years?”

“Could be millions,” Hagrid nodded encouragingly. “That’s it, Mr. Bloch, jus’ step right in front of ‘im. Ed won’t see yeh as a threat if yeh don’t act like one. Offer ‘im the wood shavin’s. They’re steeped in a special blend of turpentine, ginger and nurgle water. It’s Ed’s especial favourite.”

Remembering the fiery blasts that had peppered the Great Hall, Trenton stood well back from the Jiskra, extending his open hand as far as he could toward the creature’s bobbing heads. After a tense, calculating moment, the Jiskra’s right head snapped forward, snatching the shavings from Trenton’s hand and gulping them down.

“There!” Hagrid proclaimed happily, clapping Trenton on the back and nearly knocking him over. “Easy as Poisonberry Pie! Ms. Fourcompass, I believe yer next.”

When it was James’ turn, the Jiskra eyed him beadily, hissing with both of its tooth-lined beaks. Hagrid muttered under his breath, taking the shavings from James’ hand. “Sorry, James. Same thing ‘appened with yer brother. Ed ‘as a long memory, yeh know, an’ keeps a bit of a grudge. Nothin’ pers’nal.”

James nodded gratefully. “No problem, Hagrid. I’m not so comfortable around him either.”

The new Transfiguration teacher, it turned out, was a seemingly stern young wizard who worked for the Wizarding Examination Authority. Hoffminster Tofty had hair so lank and black and eyes so narrow and cold that he looked, to those familiar with their Hogwarts history, like a younger reincarnation of notorious Potions Master Severus Snape. This effect was ruined, however, the moment Tofty opened his mouth, revealing a high, reedy voice and a pronounced stutter. As much as James wanted to hate Tofty, he couldn’t help finding the contrast of his appearance and his voice oddly endearing. Furthermore, even Rose had to grudgingly admit that Tofty was quite accomplished at Transfiguration, with a passion for the subject that was infectious, despite his constant attempts at a stern and imposing demeanour. In fact, the only students who seemed intimidated by Professor Tofty’s nearly cartoonish severity were the fifth years who were scheduled to sit under him for their O.W.L. examinations.

Two weeks passed after the disastrous encounter with the Jiskra. Rose received a new wand by post from her parents (inspected thoroughly by Professor Votary), even as she maintained a poisonous grudge against Albus for breaking her previous one.

“You know how Mr. Ollivander always says the wand chooses the witch?” she asked archly, holding up the new wand. “Well this one’s never met me before today. I’ll be lucky if it doesn’t blast us all to bits. I’ll be calibrating for weeks.”

James sympathized. Despite having returned to Ollivander’s in person for his own replacement wand, it had required several awkward weeks to get fully used to.

As the days passed, James, Rose and Albus began to harbour some slim hope that Filch had forgotten about their punishment. Finally, on a stiflingly hot Saturday morning, just as the three, along with Ralph, Scorpius and Deirdre Finnegan, were leaving breakfast and considering a gratefully lazy day out by the lake (in carefully separate pairs, of course), Filch rounded them up and herded them downstairs to his office.

He seemed unusually terse, distracted and grumpy, despite the fact that he was engaged in one of his favourite activities: punishing students. James, Rose and Albus followed him silently into his cramped

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office, frowning worriedly at each other as the old caretaker muttered tensely to himself.

“Sit!” he ordered, waving his cane and summoning three rickety chairs from the corners of the office. To himself, he whined, “Where are they, the dratted things... Ah. No, those are dead, all the magic leaked right out of ‘em. Curses. I knows I was keeping one aside here just in case. Ah!” He brandished a very bedraggled black quill, stripped nearly bare of its feathers. He examined it triumphantly in his hand, and then seemed to realize how pathetic the thing looked. The smile fell from his stubbly grey cheeks and he rolled his eyes.

“Here,” he ordered gruffly, rummaging on his desk again. “I’ve only got one of these left, and it doesn’t work so well as it once did. Just... just swap it around while you do lines so you all get a taste of it, see?” Gathering two normal quills and adding them to the pitiable black quill, he shoved them into the hands of the waiting students. James took the black quill, noting how limp it felt in his hands, how mashed and lifeless its tip appeared. Filch waved his cane once again. “*Exorier!*” he commanded. With a soft *fwump* several sheets fell out of the air onto a small, rickety table between the students. “Now, let me see...” the old Squib grumbled, stroking the sandpapery stubble of his chin. “What was it these three did? Was it illegal loitering? Skipping lessons? No... unsanctioned club meeting?”

“We set the Jiskra loose in the Great Hall,” Albus offered helpfully.

“I was just getting to that!” Filch exclaimed angrily, running a hand through his thin, greasy hair and leaving it in a wild strew. “If only you’d give me a moment t’ think! Gor! Blimey!” He blinked, and then turned around, nervously examining a huge chart that covered the wall behind his desk. The chart, which was a new addition since James’ last visit to the Caretaker’s office, was crammed with names, offences, and a series of colour-coded checkmarks, cross-outs, and circles. Filch muttered to himself feverishly, running a callused index finger back and forth over the grid-work of names and dates. “Wait a moment. I did you three already, didn’t I?”

James glanced aside at Rose, then Albus. “Er... er...”

“No, sir,” Rose admitted honestly. “But, well... we certainly can’t blame you for thinking so. What with so much to... er... keep track of.”

“Gor,” Filch shook his head and heaved a great sigh, still studying the chart. “You’ve no idea, young miss, and that’s a fact. So many punishments. So many misbehaving students.”

Albus nodded tentatively. “And there’s really only so much one man can do,” he suggested. “I mean, it’s a thankless job, isn’t it?”

Filch’s shoulders drew up in a sudden, hitching sigh. When he turned around, James was shocked to see tears welling in the ancient caretaker’s eyes. “A simple thanks wouldn’t go amiss!” he agreed, his voice high and choked. He dropped weakly into his chair, producing a startled, wrenching squeak from the old springs. “Not that I’m complainin’, mind, but there’s just so many punishments a man can hand out! There’s only so much a man can manage! ‘Keep order, Mr. Filch,’” Filch suddenly mimicked, lowering his voice to a gravelly approximation of Headmaster Grudje’s, “‘You are the iron fist of discipline, Mr. Filch. Let nothing slip through your grasp. The school is counting on you.’ Why, it’s almost too much for a man to live up to...!”

James nodded, and adopted a sympathetic tone of voice. “Takes all the fun right out of it, I’d wager.”

“Oh, that it does, lad,” Filch agreed heartily, producing a ratty grey hankie from a breast pocket and blowing mightily into it. “That it does. Why, it’s almost a man’s worst nightmare: learning to hate the thing he’s always loved most.”

“You know who really needs to do lines,” Albus suggested meaningfully. “Headmaster Grudje. For taking advantage of your sense of responsibility.”

Filch nodded wistfully, mistily, and then seemed to catch himself. He sat up and glared at Albus, his eyes narrowed, albeit red-rimmed and watery. “Oh, you little imp,” he growled. “You lot are just winding me up. It won’t work, I tell you!” His cheeks flushed with mingled embarrassment and rage. “One hundred lines, each of you! ‘I will not make Mr. Filch’s life any more difficult!’” he ordered, then hastily added, “‘And I will not tell anyone that Mr. Filch blubbed in front of me!’ Now go! And not another word!”

With a sigh, James drew one of the pieces of parchment toward him. He examined the tip of the worn quill, saw that it was congealed black with blood. When he began to write, however, it produced only a faint, squeaky scrawl, barely visible. The back of his hand tickled, scratching the letters out but not drawing any blood.

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Without raising his head, he glanced up at Rose. She was on her third line already, just finishing the phrase WILL NOT TELL THAT MR. FILCH BLUBBED in her neat, curly handwriting.

A sudden squawking noise made James jump in his seat. It seemed to have the same effect upon Filch, who scrambled at his desk, dislodging a pile of confiscated dung bombs and Skiving Snackbox sweets. He located a small statue and, strangely, held it close to his lips. “Yes, Headmaster!” he said loudly, speaking apparently to the statue.

“Mr. Filch,” the statue said in a grating, hollow voice. “There seems to be a gathering of students approaching the Quidditch pitch. I do not believe there are any practices scheduled for today.”

Filch slapped a hand over his eyes and drew it wearily down, making his already long face positively horse-like. He gathered himself and forced a ghastly smile. “Students often conduct scratch Quidditch matches on weekends, Headmaster. I doubt they are using the opportunity to engage in revolutionary behaviour.”

“I did not equip you with a magical cane to doubt, Mr. Filch,” said the statue (which was, James saw, a tiny representation of the headmaster), “but to act as my representative. I cannot be everywhere. I expect you to be my eyes, ears, and...”

“Guiding hand,” Filch finished weakly, nodding. “Yes, sir. Right away, sir.”

The statue in Filch’s hand emitted a faint, declamatory squawk and fell silent. Filch set it back on his desk carefully, almost as if he thought it was a small bomb. “Some magic,” he grumbled under his breath. “Constant interruptions. A man can’t have a single solitary moment.”

“What was that, Mr. Filch?” the statue demanded.

Filch nearly fell off his chair. “Sorry, sir,” he answered manically, trying to catch the heap of parchments that he had inadvertently knocked over. The pages, each covered with lines scribbled in dark, blotchy blood, slithered through his hands and scattered to the filthy floor. “Nothing, sir! Just... on my way is all!”

The statue squawked again. Filch gave up on the slithering parchments, letting them slip off his desk and scatter to the floor like leaves. He stared at the tiny statue, then, tentatively, waved a hand in front of it. When there was no response, he located a large, stained mug and placed it, with extreme care, over the statue, hiding it. Only then did

he collapse backwards in his chair, groaning and muttering incomprehensibly to himself. After a minute, wearily, he heaved himself to his feet, collected his cane, and stalked from the room without a word or even a backwards glance.

“I don’t know what’s going on here,” Albus said once Filch’s limping footsteps had echoed into silence. “I’m feeling something really, really weird. It’s almost a kind of sickness. I think it’s...”

“Pity for Mr. Filch,” Rose nodded wonderingly.

“I was going to say nausea at the stench in his office,” Albus frowned. “But yeah, I suppose there’s a little pity, too.”

James sighed, leaned back, and stretched. He tossed the black quill onto Filch’s desk and swept his parchment to the floor along with the others.

“Come on,” he urged, standing. “He’ll never know if we did these or not. And I’m not feeling too bad for that sadistic monster. He’s the reason both Professors McGonagall and Longbottom are gone. He’s getting what he deserves.”

“But he can’t help it,” Rose said, pitching her voice low and leaning to peer at the inverted mug that hid the tiny Headmaster statue. “Grudje is using him, turning his natural crankiness into a tool.”

“He’s weaponized Filch, all right,” Albus agreed, tossing his mostly blank parchment onto the floor. “Only Filch is getting sick of it. Who’d have thought that old Squib would get tired of torturing us?”

“It’s like being fed your favourite food until it makes you ill,” Rose said sadly. “The poor man,”

“I seriously can’t believe you’re feeling sorry for him,” James declared angrily. “After what he did to Lily. He made my sister bleed just to get back at me. And he enjoyed it.”

Rose frowned, remembering. She nodded. “You’re right. To the devil with him. I hope Headmaster Grudje works him into the grave.”

“That’s more like it,” Albus said fervently as they made their way out of the Caretaker’s office. “*Now* you’re talking like a *Weasley*.”



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17. LAIR OF THE GOWROW

Throughout the diminishing weeks of school, as the final Quidditch tournament (and the secret summit of magical and Muggle leaders) approached, James kept an increasingly alert eye on the fireplace in the Gryffindor common room. He began to stay up late nearly every night, watching for any appearance of his father. Surely, Professor McGonagall had told the Order of the Phoenix what was happening. Surely, they were planning some sort of counter-measure. And surely, someone would let him, James, know that everything was under control.

“They really don’t need to tell us anything, you know,” Rose said one night as she crammed her books and homework into her book bag. “They’re probably extremely busy, getting everything arranged, doing all sorts of spying and studying and stuff, learning what the Morrigan Web is and how to stop it.”

“But they wouldn’t even know about it if it wasn’t for us,” James insisted angrily. “They owe us at least a word. I mean, for all they know

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we're still having lessons at Durmstrang with that madman, Professor Avior. He could be trying to kill us once a week!"

"I doubt he would be that bold," Rose shook her head. "He may be vicious, but he's not rash."

James wasn't convinced. "He wouldn't have to be obvious about it. He's an evil genius, remember? He could poison us somehow. Or make us stay after class and sick another of his crazy monsters on us, call it an unfortunate accident. Anything."

"Speaking of unfortunate accidents," Rose said, shouldering her bag. "Any word from Nastasia?"

James shook his head in frustration. "I think she's actually avoiding me. She hasn't been at any of her lessons here at Hogwarts. Zane says she's even skiving off some of her classes at Alma Aleron. He's a little worried about her, even after I told him what she did in Avior's office. He says she was just playing the double agent, tricking Avior into telling us his plan."

"Well," Rose tilted her head consideringly, "What if she was? It worked, didn't it?"

James sighed and slumped, returning his attention to the low flames of the fireplace. He wanted to tell Rose what he knew about Nastasia-- that she was crazy, somehow split into two personalities, one evil and one... slightly less evil. But he'd promised Nastasia that he wouldn't. For now, just barely, that promise held him back. He decided to change the topic. "Zane did have a chat with his head of house about the Collector."

"Professor Cloverhoof?" Rose brightened. "Well that's good, isn't it? At least he has access to some people in authority. Are they going to look into it?"

James shook his head dourly. "You don't know what things are like in the States. The Progressive Element is very popular there, although nobody calls it that. Even Professor Cloverhoof is affected by it. When Zane told him there was some mad wizard in New Amsterdam threatening to attack a gathering of world leaders, Cloverhoof blew it off. He said it was a load of 'anti-egalitarian propaganda' and that Zane was above believing such things."

Rose's expression of excited hope melted into one of pained disappointment. "He didn't...!"

James nodded wearily. “He wouldn’t believe a word of it, even when Zane told him their new vice president was that same wizard in disguise. Cloverhoof laughed and told him he *wished* it was true, since it might give the Muggle government the kick it needed to finally get something done.”

Rose had no reply. The look on her face was so crestfallen that James almost wished he hadn’t told her. A minute later she bid him a doleful goodnight and left without a word.

It wasn’t until their last class at Beauxbatons that James finally learned why he hadn’t heard anything from his father, or any other member of the Order of the Phoenix.

He was sitting in the mirrored classroom as blue-robed Beauxbatons (and the insufferable Morton Comstock) clacked and shuttled the oversized abaci, continuing whatever incomprehensible magical mathematics they had been working on all year. Next to him, Ralph was leafing idly through a French copy of *The Quibbler*, shaking his head occasionally and turning the magazine upside down, trying to understand some of the more obscure magical star charts and illustrations.

“You know,” he whispered, “I think this magazine almost makes *more* sense in another language.”

James sighed disconsolately. On the other side of the grand classroom, Lucia Gruberova smiled at him secretively. James offered her a weak smile of his own. To Ralph he muttered, “Have we ever figured out what exactly we’re supposed to be doing in this class?”

“Harnessing the cosmic harmonics and manipulating the resonant frequencies of time and space,” Ralph answered. “Whatever that means.”

“Well whatever it is,” James said in a bored voice, “We better wrap it up. We’re almost done for the year.”

“It’s really a shame that you can’t even understand the coolest thing your people have worked out about magic,” Morton Comstock commented, standing back from his abacus and cracking his knuckles. “I mean, you waste all your time turning teacups into turtles and you completely miss out on the magical equivalent of one small step for man, one giant leap for wizardkind.”

James rolled his eyes. “What are you talking about, Comstock?”

“I’m talking about space travel,” the ginger boy answered smugly, his eyes bulging behind his glasses. “Duh! Flitting around the stars without any spaceships, just by using the power of magical constants. I

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mean, I knew math was powerful, but this stuff is amazing. And wizard boy here doesn't even get it!" He snickered to himself.

"Here's an idea, Comstock," James suggested, his cheeks reddening in spite of himself. "Why don't you do us all a favour and zap *yourself* to some other planet?"

Comstock sniggered again. "Shows what you know. Nobody 'zaps' themselves anywhere. Magical constants are about moving the universe around *you*. Next thing you'll be telling me you want to fly to the moon on one of your turtle teacups." He snorted at his wit.

"James," Ralph said suddenly, his voice low and tense. "Take a look at this!"

Still fuming, James glanced down at the magazine in Ralph's hands. Immediately, all thought of Comstock emptied from his mind.

"Is that...?!" he asked, disbelieving his own eyes. "Is that... Professor McGonagall?"

Ralph nodded fervently.

Sure enough, occupying one full page in the middle of the French *Quibbler*, was a picture of the former Transfiguration Professor and Headmistress. The photo appeared to be quite old, showing a rather younger version of McGonagall standing in the Great Hall, unsmiling, surrounded by students during what appeared to be an examination.

"Why's she in the *Quibbler*?" James asked in a low voice, struggling to make sense of the headline on the opposite page.

Ralph shook his head. "Dunno! We need someone who reads French."

"Fortunately we're in a French school," James suggested eagerly, and then frowned. "Unfortunately, they aren't the friendliest people I've ever met. And they're all pretty busy, what with all this magical space travel and whatnot."

"Cosmic temporal manipulation," Comstock corrected loftily.

"I can read some French," a female voice suggested.

James glanced up to see Lucia standing next to him. She shrugged. "I wouldn't want any of *them* to hear me," she said, nodding toward the busy, blue-robed Beauxbatons students, "But I've been taking French since I was ten. I could probably figure it out."

She hunkered between Ralph and James, taking the magazine in her hands and studying it closely. "There was..." she said slowly,

squinting. “An attack. She attacked some people, it looks like. But, she’s one of your teachers, right? I remember her.”

James screwed up his face in confusion. “McGonagall *attacked* someone?”

“She seemed to want to attack *me*, sometimes,” Ralph admitted consideringly. “Like the time I grew a peach tree in her classroom. The look on her face was right scary.”

“No, wait,” Lucia said, still reading. “She didn’t attack anyone. She *was* attacked, but she fought back. This was a couple weeks ago, it seems. It says there was some sort of... ambush? They cornered her outside her home, I think. A bunch of... wolves? That doesn’t make sense.”

“The W.U.L.F.,” James exclaimed, stabbing a finger at the magazine. “McGonagall was attacked by the Wizards United Liberation Front! The same lunatics that killed the American Vice President!”

Ralph’s face paled. “That means Professor Avior was in on it,” he whispered. “He’s the one making it all happen, isn’t he? But why would he attack Professor McGonagall?”

A sinking feeling filled James as the answer struck him. “Because of what we told her. She knew about Avior’s plans because we told her all about them. Avior must have figured out what we did and attacked her to keep her from telling anyone.”

“But they didn’t succeed,” Lucia said, still reading. “She fought back. Took out a few of them. It says three of the ones who ambushed her ended up in someplace called... called the anti-curse care unit?”

“That’s the counter-jinx ward at St. Mungo’s,” James said impatiently. “What happened to her? Is she all right?”

Lucia skipped to the end of the article and read haltingly, ““After Madame McGonagall’s sudden and unexpected termination of her post at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, this attack is a suspiciously timed event, indicating a very powerful infestation of Bad Luck Laelaps, probably contracted during the Professor’s previous holiday in the Romanian countryside.” She stopped reading, her brow furrowed. “What’s a Bad Luck Laelap?”

“That’s *the Quibbler* being *the Quibbler*,” James sighed. “Did she survive? Is she all right?”

Lucia shook her head and leaned over the magazine again. “In any event, Madame McGonagall, having sustained numerous curses and

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jinxes during the attack, is currently in guarded condition at St. Mungo's anti-curse unit, apparently unconscious and under constant healer supervision, for all the good it will do in such an advanced case of Laelap-induced Luck-lacking."

Ralph leaned back against the mirrored wall, stunned. "She never told anyone what you found out about Avior," he said hopelessly. "She couldn't have."

"That's why I haven't heard from my dad," James agreed, and then sat up, alarmed. "That means no one is doing anything to stop Avior! No one even knows what's about to happen!"

"The attack you all talked about?" Lucia clarified, keeping her voice hushed. "When we found that... er... man... in the woods?"

James nodded helplessly, stunned.

"Well then," Lucia shrugged seriously, closing the magazine and handing it back to Ralph. "I guess it's up to you, then, isn't it?"

Ralph took the magazine and looked hard at the picture of Professor McGonagall. To James' surprise, the bigger boy nodded. "I guess it is." He sighed deeply and turned to James. "Looks like we're going to need Zane's crazy plan after all."



Zane's crazy plan, of course, was a convoluted method of sneaking into the endless warren of basements and dungeons beneath Alma Aleron's Administration Hall in search of the elusive-- and apparently terrifying-- Crone Laosa, who, according to Rose's research, was possibly one of the only people on earth harbouring the secrets of the Morrigan Web.

Zane was, as usual, wildly enthusiastic about the idea. "It's all totally still set up and ready to go," he declared in a stage whisper at their

next Ancient Runes class. He dug in his pocket and produced a fat gold coin, an American Drummel. “The Protean charm is as strong as ever. Wherever I vanish this baby to, the spell yanks the American side of the Hogwarts cabinet along with it. We step in on this side and pop out on the other side in the new location.”

Ralph shook his head impatiently. “But what about this Crone Laosa person?” he whispered, leaning close to James and Zane. “How are we going to find her?”

Zane shrugged. “That’s the easy part. She’s supposed to be the guardian of all the lower levels of Admin Hall. We tromp around and make enough noise, she’ll just come to us.”

“And what then?” James frowned. “She’s supposed to be, like, ten kinds of horrible, isn’t she? How do we keep her from cursing us into cockroaches, much less convince her to tell us all of her darkest secrets?”

“Leave that to me,” Zane said with a firm nod. “I’ve got an ace up my sleeve.”

James’ frown deepened. “What’s that mean?”

“It means I’ve got a few secrets of my own,” the blond boy whispered loftily. “And besides, you probably wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Whatever,” James muttered, still frowning. “Ralph, just keep that monster wand of yours handy. I have a feeling we may need it.”

“Mr. Potter,” Professor Votary’s voice echoed stridently, snapping James to attention. “Perhaps you’d like to come up to the blackboard and use your busy whispers to translate this ancient Angkoran rune? Do be careful, though: mispronunciations often trigger unpleasant curses. I once saw a cryptologist’s tongue transfigured into a dung beetle by a careless consonant.”

Glowering and dragging his feet, James stood and made his way to the blackboard.

“And never a more foul-mouthed dung beetle have I encountered,” Votary went on, shaking his head. “The Sumerian swear words that that creature uttered. Why, it was enough to make a rock troll blush.”

James’ tongue, fortunately, did not get transformed into a foul-mouthed dung beetle, but he did spend the dinner hour haunted by a particularly pesky Angkoran demon, which circled his head like a semi-transparent bat, pecking at him and screaming incomprehensible insults.

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“Makes me wonder whatever happened to Peeves,” Rose commented, watching the demon with a wistful expression. “Haven’t seen him in months.”

“Good riddance,” Graham Warton proclaimed around a mouthful of stew. “Stupid poltergeist ruined my diorama of the Battle of the Red Mages. Turned them all into fire imps and sent them invading everyone else’s dioramas.”

“I remember that,” Heth Thomas smiled mistily. “It was hilarious.”

“It was a miniature massacre,” Ashley Doone called spitefully from the Ravenclaw table. “I spent weeks on that model of King Kreagle’s court. Took those imps about ten seconds to pillage it and burn it down.”

Heth nodded. “Like I said, bloody hilarious.”

“Quit it!” James shouted, waving his hands at the Angkoran demon. “So I mixed up ‘djaa’ and ‘bjaat’! It’s a dead language already! Get over it!”

Ignoring the demon, Albus squeezed in next to James. “So when are we going to visit old Crone Laosa?”

James blinked at him. “Who’s ‘we’? How do you even know about that?”

Albus nodded toward Ralph, who was cramming in between Rose and Scorpius. James glared at him.

“What?” Ralph proclaimed, taken aback. “He was with you in Avior’s office, wasn’t he? He’s as much a part of this as we are. And at this point we need all the help we can get.”

“How many people do you think we can shove into the vanishing cabinet?”

“Easy,” Scorpius replied, “We just take two trips.”

“Or more,” Rose nodded.

“Besides,” Albus said blithely. “Not *all* of us are the size of a bloated yeti.”

“Hey!” Ralph said, sitting up straight in his seat. “I’m just big boned. I can’t help it.”

“Where are you lot headed, then?” Graham Warton asked, nudging Albus with an elbow.

“Down into the dungeons of Alma Aler--”

“Nowhere!” James exclaimed, overriding his brother and shoving him backwards off the bench.

“Doesn’t sound like nowhere to me,” Lily said, replacing Albus on the bench and narrowing her eyes.

“Ow!” Albus complained, clutching his head where he lay turtle on the floor.

“Shut up, Al,” Both James and Lily said in unison.

Ralph rolled his eyes. “We really have got to stop discussing these things around the dinner table.”

“I said quit it!” James bellowed, flailing uselessly at the Angkoran demon as it blew raspberries into his ears.

It wasn’t until the following Wednesday night, during their walk back from the Astronomy tower, that plans for the trip into Alma Aleron’s cellars were finally solidified. After the coming Monday’s Herbology class, James, Ralph, Scorpius and Rose would meet Zane in the Great Hall, purportedly for an unscheduled Experimental Communications meeting, and take the reconfigured Alma Aleron vanishing cabinet to its new portal location beneath Administration Hall. Albus had complained loudly about being left out, but a prior arrangement with Professor Heretofore’s duelling club made it impossible.

“You can’t skip it,” James had insisted, “Or else people will be wondering where you’ve gone off to. Everyone knows you love that daft club.”

With the details worked out, all that remained was the waiting. This, James had long since learned, was the hardest part of all, as every idle moment seemed suddenly to be full of worries about the myriad ways the plan could go wrong. What if Filch caught them attempting to flit away through the Alma Aleron cabinet? What if Zane’s precarious repositioning of the Alma Aleron side of the cabinet went awry, dumping them into a subterranean lake or the lair of some clandestine poisonous beast? There was, after all, no way of knowing what terrible secrets were hidden away in the apparently endless depths beneath the American Magical school. Furthermore, what if Crone Laosa wasn’t a real witch at all, but merely a legend made up to frighten students away from the dangerous cellars? And even if she was real, was there any reason at all to expect that she would do anything with them other than curse them as trespassers? This, after all, was apparently her singular task.

By the time Monday afternoon’s Herbology class arrived, James was so preoccupied with fretting that he barely noticed Tabitha Corsica’s suspicious, steady glare.

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“Something on your mind, Mr. Potter?” she asked coolly as she handed him a pair of gloves and oversized earmuffs. “It is not wise to transplant Mandrakes while preoccupied.”

“Hmm?” James muttered, and then shook himself. “Oh. No. Not a thing.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, pausing in her distribution of the earmuffs and gloves. Then, thankfully, she moved on.

Fortunately, the rest of the lesson went by quickly, filled with the piercing screeches of Mandrakes as the students hastily replanted them in larger pots. Ears still ringing despite the use of the protective earmuffs, James accompanied Ralph back to the doors of the Great Hall, where Rose and Scorpius were loitering, trying very hard to appear casual with their noses buried in various schoolbooks.

“About time,” Scorpius muttered, snapping his Arithmancy book shut. “Rose here is the only one who looks believable reading this stuff. Let’s go.”

“Wait,” James interrupted as Scorpius heaved open one of the doors. “Where’s Zane? There’s no point going through the cabinet until we know he’s repositioned the other side.”

“He said he’d meet us here at a quarter before five,” Ralph said, ducking through the door into the empty Great Hall. “That’s almost eleven in the morning his time.”

“I’m surprised he’s out of bed,” Scorpius rolled his eyes. “Either way, I’m not waiting out here where Filch can clap eyes on us.”

Quickly, furtively, the four students made their way between the empty house tables. It wouldn’t be long before students and teachers alike would begin trickling into the Great Hall for dinner. Even now, James could hear the faint clatter and clink of the house elves in the kitchen below. Ahead of him, the four vanishing cabinets stood sentinel, outlined dramatically by angled sunbeams from the windows along the left wall. For the first time in months James thought of the beginning of term, when Nastasia had appeared surreptitiously skulking around the entrance hall. He now knew how she had come through the cabinet-- having assumed her snake form, she was able to bypass the pre-class ban on witches and wizards. In light of the interview in Avior’s office, however, he had new doubts about why she had come to Hogwarts that night in the first place. She had claimed merely to be exploring. And yet...

James glanced toward the empty staff table, remembering. There had been some sort of small sack there, lying in the moonlight. Nastasia had claimed it, but offered no explanation for it. What had she been carrying in that sack? And where had it gone?

His thoughts were interrupted by Rose as she joined him near the head table. "Blimey, but that thing's ugly," she said, nodding curtly toward the rose window overhead.

James glanced at her, then up at the monstrous clock. Its five faces glowered down at him, showing the times in each of the time zones represented by the cabinets. For the moment, James noticed, the Durmstrang clock hands pointed straight up, unmoving. The Durmstrang cabinet was still broken, obviously. The other faces ticked busily, marking the tiny, insectile movements of their iron hands. Beneath them, the great pendulum scythed back and forth, swishing faintly as it sliced the air into seconds.

"He's officially late," Scorpius complained tensely, glaring up at the Alma Aleron clock. "He's going to get us all caught, the stupid Yank."

"Give him another minute," Rose sighed.

James waited, shifting nervously from foot to foot.

Suddenly, behind him, came the unmistakable click of the Great Hall's door latch. James spun on the spot.

"What was that?" Ralph rasped in a high, nervous voice.

Rose shook her head. "It sounded like someone coming in..." She frowned and shrugged. "Perhaps it was just the wind."

James squinted back at the closed doors. There was no one there. "Maybe--" He began, but was interrupted by the much louder sound of the Alma Aleron cabinet bursting open.

Relieved, James turned around again, only to find himself face to face with the last person he expected.

"Nastasia," he declared. To his own ears, it sounded like both an accusation and a question.

"Hi, James," she said, smiling faintly but not meeting his eyes. "Miss me?"

"Why is she here?" Scorpius asked bluntly, addressing Zane as he followed her out of the cabinet.

Zane was unperturbed. "Why shouldn't she be? She was there in New Amsterdam, wasn't she? And she helped you lot get the truth out of Avior. Besides, she's the ace up our sleeve."

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“Nastasia?” James exclaimed, gesturing at her but looking at Zane. “*She’s* your secret?”

“I’m everybody’s secret, it seems,” Nastasia interjected, threading an arm through James’ elbow. He pulled away irritably.

“Are we expecting anyone else?” he demanded, throwing up his hands. “The Alma Aleron marching band, perhaps? Professor Jackson’s crazy Werewolf militia?”

“Good to see you, too, mate,” Zane soothed amiably, throwing an arm around James’ shoulders. “It’s all part of the plan, trust me. Besides,” he produced the gold Drummel from his pocket and bounced it on his palm. “The marching band was already busy tracking down the Ark of the Covenant.”

James shrugged off his friend’s arm but couldn’t resist a wry, helpless grin. “You really are completely mad.”

Zane nodded. He turned and held the coin out in front of him. “Ralphinator, you want to do the honours? Use that Godzilla wand of yours and send this to its last location. If I’m right, it’ll end up just below the Admin Hall cafeteria. Safe enough, despite the reek of old goulash.”

“Is that deep enough to get Crone Laosa’s attention?” James asked as Ralph rummaged in his pockets for his wand.

Zane shrugged. “It’s a start. Like my dad always says, better safe than buried a thousand feet underground in some monster maggot’s large intestine.”

“Words to live by,” Scorpius prodded. “Get to the magic, Ralph, and be quick about it. People are due for dinner any moment.”

Ralph brandished his wand tentatively, his mouth pressed into a resolute line. He was, James realized, becoming accustomed to stepping up when particularly strong and precise magic was called for.

“*Saltus Retrorsum*,” he declared, tapping the coin with his wand. It vanished neatly with a small pop.

“Nice one, Ralph,” Zane declared, turning back to the Alma Aleron cabinet. “I half-thought I’d have to go looking around for my hand when we got there.”

“Cram in, everybody,” Rose said, hurrying into the cabinet. “Let’s get this over with!”

Zane squeezed in next to her. “I hope you left all your cardigans at home this time, Weasley.”

“Shut it, Walker.”

Ralph followed, ducking to fit his bulk into the remaining space.

“Budge up, Zane!” Rose complained as the door swung shut. “You’re on my foot!”

A moment later, a green flash outlined the door brilliantly. With an eerie thump, the voices inside cut off.

James glanced back at Nastasia. “I’ve got a load of questions for you,” he said.

“Sorry,” she replied brightly, “I’m fresh out of answers today. Try back tomorrow, why don’t you?”

James shook his head wearily, abandoning her and approaching the cabinet.

“Wait,” Nastasia said, grasping James’ elbow. Irritably, he turned back. She met his gaze fixedly, almost seeming to struggle with herself to maintain eye-contact. “I told you not to trust me,” she said. “But I didn’t mean to turn on you. Really. Avior trusted me. He told me to look up Dumbledore’s old passwords. I used his trust to get what we needed. It was him I betrayed. Not you.”

James studied her face sceptically. He shook his head. “I don’t know if I can believe you,” he admitted in a low voice. “And I don’t know if I want to, either.”

She sighed briskly, finally lowering her eyes. She let go of his arm.

“Work out your trust issues later, you two,” Scorpius declared from the Alma Aleron cabinet. “Or I’m leaving without you.”

Without another word, James climbed into the cabinet, pressing against the back wall to allow room for Nastasia. Almost reluctantly, she stepped inside after him. She turned away from him, facing the open door. After a second, the door swung shut. James braced himself. There was a pause, followed by the now-familiar greenish flash and dropping, sickening thump.

The door swung open again on pitch darkness. Heat flooded the cabinet, along with a cloying, overpowering stench. It didn’t smell like old goulash, however. It smelled like sulphur and age and mouldy dampness. The only sound was the steady, echoing drip of water.

“Ladies first,” Scorpius chimed, nudging Nastasia. “You’ve been here before, right?”

Nastasia didn’t answer. Instead, she raised her wand. “Lumos,” she commanded in a flat voice. The wand flared, illuminating the interior

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of the cabinet and nothing else. Slowly, tentatively, she stepped out into echoing darkness.

Feeling an unshakable sense of deep foreboding, James followed her.

“Lumos,” Scorpius muttered, adding his own wand light to Nastasia’s. Rough, wet stone reflected the light blackly beneath James’ feet. He looked up, searching for the ceiling, and was shocked to see only the faint shadow of stalactites hundreds of feet above.

“It’s a cavern,” Zane’s voice called out of the darkness, waking a chorus of echoes. “Wasn’t expecting this, exactly.”

“I thought you said you’d tested this already?” Scorpius called back.

Nastasia answered next to him. “We did. But we vanished the coin into the cellars from the lawn in front of Admin Hall, a few hundred feet at most. Ralph may be a whiz with a wand, but it’s a different thing to hit the same mark from an ocean away.”

“Like hitting the bullseye of a dartboard on the moon,” Zane nodded, approaching out of the darkness with Rose and Ralph. “At least Ralph here got us on the board. Not your fault, pal.” He clapped Ralph heartily on the shoulder.

James peered around, frowning. The vanishing cabinet was barely a crooked silhouette in the darkness, its door partway open. “So where exactly are we, then?”

“My guess?” Zane shrugged, “We’re still under Admin Hall. Just, you know, a little lower than expected. Ah!” He hunkered down suddenly. When he straightened again he was buffing the gold Drummel on his shirt. “Need this, don’t I? It’s more than a Protean target. It’s my current life savings.”

“So how are we supposed to find our way back up to the main cellars?” James asked impatiently. “I don’t see any stairs or anything.”

Rose fanned herself with her hand, beginning to sweat in the subterranean heat. “The dwarves who built Administration Hall surely would have known this cavern was here. They’d have tunnelled into it and used it for resources and storage. If we explore around a bit we’re sure to find a way up and out.” She turned and peered into the darkness, raising her lit wand.

“Bollocks to that,” Scorpius shook his head. “If we’re back under Alma Aleron now, why don’t we just reposition the cabinet for another go? You’ve got the coin, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” James agreed. “Do your Protean repositioning thing from here. We can hit the mark right on the nose and avoid tramping around the centre of the earth all night.”

Zane nodded and shrugged. “Makes sense to me. Ralph? Round two, if you please.”

He held the coin out to Ralph once more, who produced his wand and levelled it carefully.

“What are you doing!?” Rose cried, yanking the coin out of Zane’s hand and interrupting Ralph in mid-spell.

“Hey!” James exclaimed. “What gives?”

“I turn away for ten seconds and you lot just about doom us!” Rose brandished the coin. “You vanish this away, what do you think happens to the cabinet?”

“It zaps back to where it’s *supposed* to be,” James explained, smacking his forehead in irritation. “That’s the whole point!”

Rose planted both fists on her hips. “And what about us?”

“Then we just hop into the vanishing cabinet and...” James stopped, blinking as he realized the fatal flaw in the plan. After a moment he clamped his mouth shut.

“All right, then,” Zane said, raising both hands. “So we almost just cut off our only means of getting home again. Lesson learned. No more rash decisions, right? We need to be extra careful.”

“*She’s* the one what said there had to be a tunnel to the surface!” James declared, flapping a hand at Rose.

“I wasn’t planning to stake my life on it!” Rose exclaimed shrilly.

“Belt up, both of you,” Scorpius sighed. “Zane is right. No more bodging around. If we’re going to get out of here, looks like we’re going to have to do it the hard way.”

Rose relaxed slightly at this and handed the Drummel back to Zane. “Don’t do anything stupid with it,” she muttered.

Zane pocketed the coin. “All right, then!” he announced cheerfully. “This way for the grand tour!” He lit his own wand and struck off. More sombrely, Scorpius and Nastasia followed.

“Hold up a moment,” James said. Quickly, he turned to the cabinet and tapped it with his wand. “*Circumnecto.*” In response, a

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golden spark shot from the end of the wand toward the cabinet, connecting them with a brief, shimmering beam. Nodding in satisfaction, he pocketed his wand, then noticed Ralph and Rose staring at him.

“What?” he asked. “It’s a basic compass charm. Sends a spark back to the cabinet so we can find it again. You think Rose is the only smart one in the family?”

Rose cocked her head suspiciously.

“All right,” James declared. “My mum taught it to me so I wouldn’t keep losing my glasses. Happy?”

Rose nodded, satisfied, and turned to follow the glow of Zane’s bobbing wandlight.

“I’m impressed, either way,” Ralph admitted as they hurried to catch up. “Dead useful, that is.”

James gave his friend a wry smile. “Thanks, Ralph.”

As they walked, the true scale of the cavern became apparent. The floor sloped steadily upward, eventually breaking into broad steps and then to uneven terraces, forcing the students to clamber up higher and higher sharp edges. As they progressed, James noticed the distant ceiling lowering to meet them. Soon enough, the stalactites were directly overhead, hanging down in glistening, dripping points, threatening to drop like stone spears at the slightest provocation. The ascent narrowed as stalagmites crowded the path, reaching up toward their counterparts on the ceiling. Zane led the group onward, occasionally clutching his wand in his teeth as he climbed.

“Is it just me,” Ralph panted, “or is it getting a bit cooler?”

“This is no accidental path,” Rose agreed. “It’s a natural fissure, widened by foot traffic who knows how long ago. I told you the dwarves would have found this cavern and connected to it somehow.”

“Bully for Big Brains Weasley,” Scorpius grouched, clambering over yet another sharp, black ledge. “You’d have thought they could have put in some stairs, at least.”

“There’s some light ahead,” Zane called back. “Torchligh, looks like.”

James peered ahead, squinting to see past the lit wands. Sure enough, a dim orange glow suffused the air above, glimmering on the sloping edges of the stalactites and stalagmites. With renewed purpose, the troupe continued their climb, following the elusive orange glow until

the floor levelled, becoming a path between hewn stone walls. The ceiling dipped down to meet them, forcing the students to hunker low.

"It's a good thing I'm not claustrophobic," Ralph muttered faintly.

"That's for sure," Zane called back, inching ahead and trying not to hit his head on the rough ceiling. "This place is tighter than a Goblin's wallet."

Ralph groaned behind James. "I was being sarcastic. I'm totally claustrophobic. Stupid, short dwarves."

"Buck up, Ralph," Rose soothed. "I think we're almost out."

In this, James suspected, Rose was being rather optimistic. Still, after ten more minutes of cramped walking, all angling steadily upwards, the ceiling finally raised, joining a much broader, human-sized corridor. Flames flickered from an iron sconce hung from the ceiling by black chains.

"Goblinfire," Rose said, wiping her brow. "Burns on nothing and never goes out. Probably been there for centuries."

"What's with all the rubbish all over the floor?" James frowned, pointing toward a litter of pickaxes, pails and helmets some distance away.

"Ooo!" Rose exclaimed happily, trotting forward for a closer look. "Dwarf-made tools! They're supposed to be some of the best made in the world!" She stooped and plucked a small spade from the floor, pulling it from a bed of ancient cobwebs. "Light as a spanner, but strong as a manticore! And look!" She held up another implement, a short-handled axe, "Just my size, too!"

"This, I believe", Scorpius said, joining Rose near the strew of tools, "is what's known as looting."

"Oh, tosh. They've been here for ages. The dwarves are long gone from these tunnels."

James drifted closer and held up his wand, examining the rough stone wall. "Just out of curiosity, what do you suppose did *that*?"

Zane and Nastasia leaned close, peering at the wall. A series of irregular, deep scratches scarred the stone. Ralph frowned nervously. "That must have been some pickaxe."

"They look more like... like..." James swallowed, reluctant to continue.

"Claw marks," Nastasia nodded, running a finger along one of the deep scratches.

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“Er,” Rose’s voice echoed tentatively from some distance away. “Er, chaps? Is this... what it looks like?”

James and Scorpius stepped over the strew of castoff tools and turned a sharp corner. Rose glanced back at them where she stood, pointing. Another pile of debris ranged further along the corridor, dancing in the orange glow of another goblinfire sconce.

“Those aren’t dwarf tools,” Ralph squeaked, stopping behind James. “Those are... er... dwarfs.”

Unfortunately, Ralph was correct. Tossed hither and thither against the walls and over the rough floor were small, heavy-browed skulls, broken ribs, and various bits of skeletal arms and legs. Glinting mellowly among the bones were complex metal shapes, broken, scattered and covered with dust.

“Armour,” James gulped. “Look. There’s a shield. And some sort of chain mail, all ripped to bits. And there’s a sword, with a... er... hand. Still attached to it.”

“Now that’s a battle I’d have liked to see,” Zane announced fervently. “Dwarves are tough cusses. And their armour is the strongest stuff going.” He plucked the sword from the floor and shook off the skeletal hand clinging to the hilt. It fell back with a dry clatter that made James wince. “See? Not a nick on it. Not even a speck of rust.” He examined the sword closely, turning it in the firelight. “A little blood though, by the looks of it. This guy got in a few slashes before kicking the ol’ bucket.”

“Zane’s right,” Rose frowned. “Dwarves are famous for their toughness in battle. What could do this to them?”

“Same thing that clawed up the walls back there, I’d bet,” Nastasia commented.

“Either way,” James said, raising his voice, “like Rose said, this stuff’s been here for ages. Whatever caused it all is long dead.”

As if in answer, a low, warbling noise lifted out of the depths. It was an eerily inhuman sound, a ululating moan, rising in pitch until it echoed all around, becoming a warbling, shrill yodel. James felt his hair stand up. Zane dropped the dwarven sword. Rose clutched Ralph’s arm with both of her hands, her eyes going wide. Even Scorpius’ face paled to that of a grey sheet. Slowly, the horrible noise died away, chasing its echoes into unseen tunnels and corridors.

“Or not,” Nastasia squeaked.

Rose looked around wildly. "Which way did it come from?"

"Who can tell?" James replied. "Come on, let's leg it out of here. There has to be a way further up."

Zane retrieved the dropped sword and held it shakily ahead of him. In his fist, the weapon looked ridiculously diminutive, despite its glinting, sharp blade. In a tight knot, the group clambered forward, stepping clumsily over skulls and broken armour. A hundred feet past the scatter of bones, the corridor ended at a barricade of criss-crossed iron bars, each as thick as James' arm, festooned with bolts the size of door knobs. Set in the middle of the barricade was an iron door with a heavy lock. Painted on the rough stone wall on either side of the barricade were large white skulls and crossbones. Above these, rather worrying, was a single word: GOWROW.

"Oh man," Zane commented worriedly.

Rose frowned at the cracked white paint. "What's it mean? What's a Gowrow?"

Scorpius shrugged. "Sounds like some kind of sweet you'd buy at Honeydukes."

Zane shook his head fervently. "It's no sweet."

"A Gowrow is a legendary American monster," Nastasia explained. "The good news is that no one's seen any for hundreds of years." She frowned thoughtfully. "The bad news is that they love caves and tunnels."

Ralph's voice was thin with worry. "So... what's it look like?"

"Cross a basilisk with an alligator," Zane said, "Then give it tusks, eyes the size of hubcaps, and claws like a hippogriff."

"But," Nastasia added, holding her hands about two feet apart, "You know... *bigger*."

Scorpius pushed to the front of the group and gripped the iron barricade with both hands. He peered through the bars at the dark corridor beyond. "Looks like they penned it in good, though. So long as it stays on the other side of these bars, I expect we'll be all right."

Closer this time, the eerie warbling cry came again, echoing all around.

"Are you sure," James asked, joining Scorpius in front of the ancient barricade, "that it's on *that* side of the bars?"

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In answer, the tunnel behind them rumbled. Dust sifted from the ceiling. On the heels of this came the unmistakable sound of claws scraping on stone, approaching swiftly.

"I think I need a bigger sword," Zane said breathlessly, spinning toward the sound.

"Rose?" James called, grabbing his cousin by the arm. "Unlocking spells are your specialty, right?" He pushed her toward the iron door. "So make with the unlocking!"

"I can't!" she protested. "I haven't calibrated my new wand for unlocking spells yet!"

"What!?"

"I'm just as likely to make it sprout fur as to unlock it!" she cried, both frightened and angry. "Somebody else has to do it!"

The Gowrow screamed again, blotting out every other sound. It seemed terribly close. The floor vibrated with its approach.

"Bloody hell," Scorpius exclaimed. "Ralph? Time to go to work."

Ralph nodded, his face slick with sweat. He stood back and levelled his wand at the ancient door. "*Alohomora!*"

A brilliant golden bolt struck the lock, illuminating its ancient keyhole. The door rattled violently in its frame. James grabbed one of the bars and tugged.

"Still locked!" he said, stepping back again. "Try another one!"

Ralph firmed his jaw and planted his feet, wand still pointing at the iron lock. "*Reserare!*"

This time, an orange bolt struck the lock, exploding into sparks. The door rattled again, but remained firmly closed.

"Try *universale clavem!*" Rose cried, hopping fearfully from foot to foot. "It's a universal key charm!"

Ralph nodded, repeating the spell in his head, then pointed his wand once more. Lime green lightning leapt from his wand, filling the keyhole and making it glow. There was a loud, ratcheting *click*.

James leapt forward and rattled the door again. "I think you actually locked it *harder* that time," he declared, shaking his head.

Behind him, Rose screamed. James turned, throwing himself back against the unyielding iron bars and pulling his cousin with him. Nastasia hunkered low, her wand extended toward the depths of the corridor. There, heaving out of the darkness, a heavy, slithering shape

appeared. A pair of enormous, perfectly round orange eyes glinted, reflecting the light of the goblinfire sconce. A moment later, the creature lunged forward, bashing the sconce from the ceiling and snuffing it beneath its scaly belly. The flash of light allowed only a brief glimpse of muscular, reptilian arms tipped with black claws, curving yellow tusks, and a long, grinning, scaly head.

Desperately, Zane threw the dwarven sword. It glinted as it spun out of the light, clattering against the creature's scaly hide.

"My hero," Nastasia said, pulling the blonde boy back.

The Gowrow slithered forward with horrible speed, its scaly body rasping against the stone walls, its glinting orange eyes bobbing hypnotically. It screamed again, sending a gust of cold breath along the tunnel.

Green light flashed. Nastasia, James saw, was firing killing curses at the behemoth, to no avail. Rose turned away from the scene, burying her face against James' shoulder. He couldn't blame her. Dimly, almost clinically, he realized he had never been more primally terrified in his life.

Scorpius jumped forward, blocking James' view of the approaching monster. He grabbed Ralph by the shoulder, spun the bigger boy around, and wrestled his arm upwards so that his wand pointed once again at the iron door. Against the shrieking approach of the Gowrow, Scorpius' voice was barely audible.

"*Convulsis!*" he cried gripping Ralph's wrist with both hands.

A bolt of blue shot from Ralph's wand. It struck the door just above James' shoulder, igniting a blast of purple sparks. The door exploded backwards, tearing from its hinges and clattering violently to the floor. James fell backward through the sudden opening, dragging Rose with him.

"Come on!" Scorpius shouted, grabbing Nastasia and Zane, one in each hand. Stumbling and dazed, they bowled through the iron door frame, pushing Ralph ahead of them and falling atop James in a heap, knocking the wind from his lungs.

The Gowrow slammed against the iron barricade, wrenching it out of true but hopelessly wedging in its broken door frame. The monster screamed again and gnashed its jaws. Its teeth clacked and its tusks slashed mere inches from the scrambling students.

"Run!" James cried, pushing Zane ahead of him.

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“No!” Scorpius countered, pointing back toward the iron barricade. “*Reparo* the door!”

James glanced back over his shoulder. As he did, the Gowrow strained forward, wrenching the barricade further out of true. Metal screeched as the bars slowly bent.

“Ralph!” James called. “He’s right! Repair the door! Quick!”

Dazed, Ralph glanced from James to the broken door where it lay, bent almost double, on the stone floor. His face cleared and hardened. “Everybody stand back,” he shouted, raising his wand again. Its lime green tip seemed to glow in the darkness.

James pressed back against the stone wall of the tunnel, joining Rose and Scorpius. Nastasia and Zane huddled across from them, their faces pale and worried.

A loud, wrenching screech echoed through the tunnel. The Gowrow had forced its head and left shoulder through the deteriorating gate. It screamed, filling the tunnel with its cold breath and chilling, ululating shriek.

“*Reparo!*” Ralph shouted, raising his voice-- somehow-- over the noise of the Gowrow.

With a sudden metallic screech, the door straightened, flipped into the air, and spun back toward the iron barricade. It slammed back into its frame, punching the Gowrow backwards, head over slithering tail, so that it crashed against the floor and slid, arms flailing and slashing at the stone walls. When it came to a stop, it fell back limply, its tail forming a question mark on the gritty floor.

“Is...” Rose quavered, “is it... dead?”

Zane shook his head. “No chance. Just knocked out.”

“You sure that repair job of yours will hold, Ralph?” James asked faintly.

Ralph nodded with grim confidence. “Good as new, I’d wager.” He turned to Scorpius and frowned. “That thing you did, grabbing my wand hand... I didn’t think that was possible.”

“Neither did I,” Scorpius shrugged shakily. “But I remembered something my grandfather taught me.”

James joined him in the centre of the tunnel, unable to take his eyes from the repaired barricade and the horrible prone creature behind it. “And what was that?”

Scorpius gestured at Ralph's wand. "Subtlety is a dead man's last mistake."

Nastasia nodded. "Well that sure wasn't subtle. I guess we all owe you one, don't we?"

"Let's not start clapping each other on the back just yet," Scorpius replied, firming his voice. "We still have to find this Crone Laosa and get the truth out of her about the Morrigan Web."

"Assuming she's a real person," James added wearily.

"And has any secrets to share," Rose agreed.

"And doesn't just feed us to *that* thing," Ralph concluded, hitching a thumb back at the Gowrow.

"What a bunch of sour-pusses you bunch are," Zane chided. "Come on! The worst has to be behind us now, right?"

Much more slowly and tentatively, the group resumed their journey, inching their way further into the darkening depths of Alma Aleron's ancient catacombs, wands held high against the shadows. James didn't want to admit it aloud, but he had a foreboding feeling that Zane's assumption couldn't be more wrong.



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Soon enough, the tunnel began to angle up again, turning into a stone stairway, punctuated by landings, cross corridors, and great, empty halls. Goblinfire sconces and torches lit the way, despite the obvious disuse of the tunnels themselves. Dust and cobwebs clung to every surface, wafting as the troupe passed. Finally, they reached a monstrous wooden door, fortunately unlocked. It creaked open as Zane pushed it, revealing a more brightly lit corridor lined with arches and tapestries, muted with age and a thick layer of dust.

“Cool,” Zane muttered, his voice unconsciously hushed. “These show the construction of Alma Aleron.” He pointed. “There’s Roberts and Pepperpock at the ground-breaking. And there are the dwarves digging the foundation of Admin Hall.”

“Wait,” Rose said suddenly, stopping in her tracks. “Whose footprints are those?”

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James glanced down. Leading away from his own feet, clearly defined on the dusty floor, was a set of fresh footprints, somewhat smaller than his own.

“Somebody else is down here,” Ralph said.

“Maybe it’s her,” Rose suggested. “Crone Laosa.”

James didn’t think so, but resisted the urge to voice this suspicion.

Zane clapped Ralph on the back. “What say we follow them? It’s the only lead we’ve got, right?”

No one spoke up, either to concur or dissent. Thus, silently and carefully, the group crept forward, following the footprints. They led straight down the corridor and around a corner, where they met a second set of footprints. Together, these progressed along a narrow hall and toward a small, dark archway, blocked with a mostly closed wooden door. Firelight flickered teasingly beyond the cracked opening.

“Voices,” Rose whispered. “Is that her?”

As quietly as possible, the students inched toward the door, huddling against the wall, careful not to scuff their feet on the dusty floor. Sure enough, faint and echoing, a voice seemed to be in mid-conversation.

“I don’t get many official visitors, you must understand.” It was an old woman’s voice, cracked and oozing with false sweetness. “I must say, I very nearly cursed you for an interloper. It is my only job, you know. Imagine. A witch of my capabilities, reduced to a mere custodian. Even so, my duties do offer the occasional indulgence. In fact, I was slightly disappointed not to practice my arts on you. I get so few opportunities these days. Still,” she cackled teasingly, “the day is not yet done yet, is it?”

Ralph met James’ eyes in the dark hall. “It’s her!” he whispered. “Crone Laosa! But who’s she talking to?”

James shook his head, confused and worried.

Beyond the cracked door came the tinkle of silver and the faint clatter of plates. Another voice murmured, just out of the range of hearing.

“My apologies,” Crone Laosa simpered. “I am not accustomed to serving more than myself. I do hope that my humble abode does not offend.”

The second voice responded. James strained to listen, but couldn't make out the words. All he could be sure of was that Crone Laosa's visitor was a woman.

"I see," Laosa answered, responding to some unheard question. "This is not to be a pleasant visit, then. You come to dig into the past. And yet I cannot help but wonder-- for good or for ill?"

A response. James leaned close to the door but still could not hear it. The visitor was deeper in Crone Laosa's quarters, it seemed, around some hidden corner or behind some obstruction. He tried to peer through the crack of the door but could only see the faint flicker of fire, a simmering cauldron, the back of a blanket-draped rocking chair and a mass of blurry shadows.

"Information, then," Laosa said, a suspicious smile in her voice. "It is quite popular today not to take sides, is it? I would almost prefer that your interrogation be for evil intent than for mere 'information'. I confess that I like to know where people stand. It makes things much simpler. But so be it. Ask away. I am obliged to respond."

The visitor spoke immediately. James pressed his ear to the door's opening. There was something familiar about the voice. It was a woman, and he was almost certain she was not American. His eyes widened as a thought struck him. Could it possibly be the Lady of the Lake? If so, perhaps it would finally provide the proof Rose and Scorpius needed to believe that she was real. Avior may be the face of the Morrigan Web attack, but James was positive Judith was the one pulling the strings behind the scenes.

"Ahh," Laosa breathed. There was a faint wooden creak-- a rocking chair, perhaps? "Straight to the crux of my family's sordid past, I see. To be honest, I was prepared to guard these secrets with great vigour and terrible magic. For many years I was primed to kill for them. I laid webs of misdirection, wove great protective spells, prepared vicious traps and counter-jinxes. And yet, amazingly, no one came. No one sought out the secrets I protected. Perhaps (I told myself), just perhaps the world has grown beyond the lust for such things. Perhaps my wardens were right when they assured me that there was no one left in the world mad enough to resort to such horrors." Laosa sighed deeply, mournfully. "Indeed, after lo these many decades, no one came. But now here you are, the very first. And even you do not come to threaten, to bargain, to

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murder. You come merely to seek information. How dreadfully, horribly dull. Pray, what has become of the world above?"

The visitor's voice answered lightly. When Laosa spoke again, she seemed irritated. "Rumours and safeguards, pah. No one seeks such secrets without intent to use them. But so be it, my pretty young friend. Perhaps you are fool enough to believe what you say. I wonder if you will live to realize your mistake? But no matter. The decades have left me restless. I will give you what you seek."

Laosa paused. Her chair creaked, rocking thoughtfully for almost a minute. Then:

"It was my mother who created it. She did not mean to. It was what some ironically refer to as a 'happy accident'. She was seeking a way to prime a wand, to augment its powers for those weak in the magical arts. She had a talentless sister, you see, my aunt Tempestra. Despite her name she was nearly impotent, barely one notch above a squib. My mother wished to help her. Thus, she used a magical power source-- in her case, an enchanted ring which had once belonged to her grandfather, a warlock of great talent, highly revered and feared in his day, but alas, long dead. My mother distilled the power of her grandfather's ring, steeped it, and channelled it into her sister's wand..."

Another pause while Laosa seemed to ruminate on this. Her visitor spoke again, briefly.

"Of course it did," Laosa answered. "It was too much, too undirected. But that wasn't the worst of it. My mother had overlooked one important detail. The steeped magic had absorbed more than the strength of the old, dead warlock. It had absorbed his *intent*. It was very nearly alive. Fortunately, so long as it was imprisoned in the ring, amplified as it was by my mother's arts, it was harmless. It wasn't until my mother released it, gave it an outlet in my sister's wand, that its true power became known. But I get ahead of myself. The true story starts before that, as you surely know..."

More murmured words from Laosa's visitor. More creaking from Laosa's rocking chair.

"You truly do not know, then?" Laosa said wonderingly. "And yet, why should you? All records of the disaster have been destroyed. Only two others kept the secrets. And what has become of them? Dead. And not of curses and attacks, as one might expect. They were not killed by those hungry for the sort of power that can only be won via the artful

use of terror, but by simple old age. Consequently, their secrets have been absorbed into the dust of history, forgotten by most, discounted by the rest.” She chuckled drily to herself. “Well, by *most* of the rest. *Some* still believe. Some seek the secrets. Some wish to wield the power of the Morrigan Web, and reap its deadly reward.”

Next to James, Rose gasped at the mention of the Morrigan Web. He glanced at her, wide-eyed, as she clamped a hand over her mouth.

“Sounds like somebody beat us to the punch,” Zane whispered, frowning.

“But who?” Scorpius rasped, eyes narrowed.

“Shh!” James hushed them, raising one hand. Beyond the door, the voices were speaking again.

“So be it,” Laosa seemed to agree, a grin in her voice. “You shall hear the tale, and do with it what you will. My mother was the first to bear my duty here in the cellars, cursed to dwell these depths, forbidden from ever again appearing in daylight. It was a kindness, they told her. After all, she hadn’t *meant* to commit any crime. She could not be executed for what was, quite simply, a terrible, disastrous mistake. Her genius had merely opened a door, unleashed a power that simply could not be contained. Thus, the only option was to banish her. And with her, her only daughter, the only other witness to the terror she had wrought.”

Laosa’s chair rocked more quickly now as she warmed to the topic. “But all of that happened afterward. Before the terrors of that night, my mother, Principia Laosa, was a highly regarded professor at the institution above us. Her treatises on the interconnected magical constants of the natural world were ground-breaking, earning her world renown and a position of great honour. Thus, when she announced that she had perfected a theory regarding the transfer of magical energies, the wizarding world listened with great interest. After all, such a discovery could, in theory, grant normal lives to the magically weak, and even to squibs. Some went so far as to conjecture that Muggles could be empowered, allowing them to utilize magic that was utterly absent from their own nature.

“Satisfied with her theories, my mother finally prepared a human trial. This would be conducted on her own sister, Tempestra, using the energy long steeped from my aforementioned great-grandfather’s warlock ring. Representatives from magical institutions the world over gathered to

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witness the event. Nearly one hundred of the wizarding world's smartest and most accomplished technomancers, arithmicians, and healers convened in the medical theatre, breathless with anticipation.

"Tempestra was fearful, but excited. She had always been ashamed of her weakness, her inability to fly, to so much as transfigure a teaspoon out of a thimble. Now, finally, her life was about to change.

"If only she had known..."

Laosa paused again. Her voice was growing hoarse with so much unaccustomed speaking. There was a faint clatter as she seemed to take a drink, firming her voice. Her visitor spoke again, briefly.

"None of them," Laosa confirmed. "None of those attending had examined either the theory or the mechanism. Indeed, none had even considered the possibility of error. My own mother was too blinded by her good intentions to contemplate the potential for disaster. Thus, it was with great fanfare and lofty expectations that my great-grandfather's ring was unveiled, having been steeped in a charmed trunk right there in the theatre. The process was deceptively simple in its execution. It was a timed release. At a particular moment-- the very stroke of noon-- the transfer would trigger. My mother watched, standing there beside her sister, one hand on her shoulder. The others waited silently, wide-eyed, knowing that, one way or another, they were about to witness history in the making."

The rocking chair creaked again. The visitor's voice murmured. James pressed his ear to the door.

"Of course she did," Laosa replied quietly. "It was instantaneous, and horrible. I was watching from the wings, backstage, barely five years old at the time. My Aunt Tempestra was holding her wand out in preparation, of course, pointing at the ring, ready to accept whatever it meant to give. She was tense, trembling, but there was hope on her face. That's what I remember the most, in spite of everything.

"At the first chime of noon, the transfer triggered flawlessly, just as my mother had predicted. It crackled like lightning, connecting my great-grandfather's ring and aunt Tempestra's wand. Her fist tightened on the wand. It looked like she couldn't let go even if she had wanted to. But the lightning didn't stop. It built, became blinding..."

Murmuring; Laosa's visitor was clarifying something.

"She was," Laosa confirmed dully. "My poor aunt was dead the instant the bolt struck her wand. And yet she sat bolt upright, her arm

extended, caught in the strength of the transfer, even as it built, glowing like the sun. It barely took a second from the launch of the transfer. The power overwhelmed her wand. It was inevitable, of course. And that's when it happened."

Rose was leaning over James now, straining to listen. Laosa's voice had weakened as she spoke, reducing her words to faint mutters. There was a long, ringing pause. And then, finally, she continued.

"The transfer leapt away from my aunt's wand," she said hollowly, living the memory as if it was happening in front of her all over again. "Not in one direction, but in every direction. A dozen bolts struck out, connecting to the wizards and witches closest to it. Instantly, they jerked where they sat or stood, petrified by the jolt of power. And also instantly, branching from them, more bolts lanced out, connecting to those behind them. In a fraction of a second, every witch and wizard in the theatre was caught, frozen and petrified, in the web of the transfer. It was their wands, you see. The power of the ring, amplified to murderous proportions and imbued with the vicious malice of my great-grandfather, connected every wand in the room, forming an inescapable web of death.

"In less than a second, one hundred witches and wizards fell dead to the floor of the theatre. All I remember is the silence that followed. The terrible, awful silence..."

"I survived, of course. I was too young to bear a wand, thus I was spared. My mother, standing right next to her dead sister, had accidentally broken her own wand that morning, stupidly, in a pointless, meaningless carriage mishap. She was cursed to live, to spend her final years remembering that moment, knowing that she was responsible for the worst mass killing in the history of the country.

"And that, my pretty young friend," Laosa concluded, her voice barely a dry rasp, "is the tale of the Morrigan Web. Despite the rumours, my mother never intended to create a weapon of terror. The only time it was ever used, it was an accident, a tragedy, sparing its unwitting creator and dooming her to a life in the sunless depths. Here, with me, she lived the remainder of her years, haunted by guilt, bearing the secret of the most powerful magical weapon ever devised."

There was a long silence. James' knees ached from hunkering so long in the darkness, but he barely noticed. His mind raced with images of the upcoming Quidditch Summit-- hundreds of Hogwarts students, Quidditch players and teachers, along with the attending wizarding world

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leaders and their entourages-- all bearing wands, all suddenly connected in a crackling web of cursed magic. The wandless Muggle leaders would survive, blinking in the terrible aftermath, confused and clueless. They would be defenceless before Avior and his minions, who simply needed to stow their wands in a safe place until the Web spent its deadly force. The result would be massacre upon massacre as the Muggle survivors were cut down, one by one, like targets at a carnival.

Laosa's visitor was asking a question.

"You misunderstand," the Crone wheezed. "My great-grandfather's ring was not the key to the Morrigan Web. The ring served only as fuel. The deadly nature of the Web is that any sufficiently magical object can power it, any tool or sigil that has absorbed the strength and purpose of a very powerful witch or wizard, now dead and gone, leaving only their essence behind. My great grandfather was a warlock-- a purveyor of warfare and death-- and yet he was no horror. He was simply an amoral man willing to sell his dark talents for a rich income. Even so, look what his reflected essence wreaked when untethered and amplified!

"If only my mother had used someone else-- a witch or wizard of noble heart and gentleness-- she may well have succeeded in her plan. Or, at worst, created a Web of mere pixie dust and flowers. But that, unfortunately, did not happen. This is the world we live in, my young pretty-- a world brimming with evil determination. A world full of wicked witches and wizards whose power and intent lingers after their mortal death, just waiting to be amplified and unleashed with the proper spells and preparation. The horror of the Morrigan Web is that anyone can do it, if only they know how, and can locate a sufficient source of magical fuel and dark intent."

The visitor spoke again. James thought he could make out the question this time: "How does one stop it?"

Laosa wheezed with laughter. "One does not. Once the source of fuel is locked in place, it can only be replaced with another source of fuel, equally as powerful, and related to the same donor. Removing the enchanted object outright will only trigger the transference prematurely."

James pressed his ear directly into the crack of the door, struggling to hear as the visitor asked another question. "Then how does one recognize the Morrigan Web before it is triggered?"

"Ahh," Laosa smiled. "You see that that is the crux of the matter. Early warning and avoiding false alarms. It may be that a dead wizard's

favourite pipe is a magical time bomb. It may also be merely a quaint memento. As a famed Muggle once said, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. So how, you ask, does one tell the difference?”

The visitor murmured in an encouraging tone.

Laosa heaved a deep, resigned breath. “There are three markers,” she admitted, lowering her voice so that James, once again, could barely hear. The others crowded round him, piling outside the door and holding their breath to listen. “The first marker is the object itself. It will be a tool or instrument of someone of great power, heartlessness, and purpose. The subject must be deceased, leaving their essence to pool in the object, making it a focal point.

“The second marker is proximity,” the ancient crone went on. “The object will be in the centre of a crowd, the focal point, the headpiece. It will not be subtle. It cannot be, or the magic of its preparation will not work. And finally, perhaps most important of all, the third key is...”

Laosa’s voice cracked. She wheezed drily, coughed, and then hesitated, apparently taking a drink. Her visitor spoke to her soothingly, her own voice hushed. After an infuriatingly tense minute, Laosa spoke again. James couldn’t press his ear any closer to the door-- Rose, Zane and Scorpius hovered over him as well, leaning and straining-- but Laosa’s voice had fallen to a harsh rattle, indistinguishable beneath the distant crackle of the fireplace.

And then, in horrifyingly slow motion, James began to lose his balance. Rose and Scorpius were leaning on him, adding their weight to his precarious position. He tilted toward the door, tried desperately to right himself, and only succeeded in knocking Scorpius’ hand loose of his shoulder. The blonde boy fell atop him, tumbling him forward into the door. Rose fell as well, rolling over him, followed by Zane, who tripped over James’ legs and knocked the door completely open before sprawling full length onto a rough woven rug.

The door banged against the inside wall, rattling in its old hinges.

“Interlopers!” Crone Laosa rasped, her voice reduced to a rough, strained wheeze. She leapt from her rocking chair by the fire, wand in hand, pointing down the full extension of her arm. “Trespassers! *Eavesdroppers!*” Furiously, she stalked forward, eyes blazing on her long, wrinkled face, white hair streaming wildly behind her.

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James scrambled to back away from her but was hopelessly entangled with Rose and Scorpius. Clumsy with terror, the students flailed, shrinking back from the Crone's white fist and black, twisted wand.

“Blattam... *Immutare!*”

A purple bolt leapt from Laosa's wand. James squeezed his eyes shut, certain he was about to be blasted into cockroach-hood. Instead, the bolt struck the door, splitting it and peppering him with splinters. He risked slitting one eye and peering up.

Laosa's wrist was being gripped from behind by a pale white hand, raised just enough to offset her aim. A face, smiling and framed by satiny black locks of hair, peeked over the Crone's shoulder calmly.

“Actually, Madame,” Tabitha Corsica said with a smug sigh, “I'm afraid that most of these... are with me.”



“I suppose the truth would make a better story,” Corsica said as the gathering left Crone Laosa's quarters (Crone Laosa herself fuming curses and shaking with fury behind them) “if it wasn't so sadly obvious. When I saw you in the greenhouse during this afternoon's lesson, Mr. Potter, I knew immediately that you were up to no good. You are as easy to read as a Beedle the Bard picture book. I simply followed you and your little clique of troublemakers.” She laughed lightly.

“It *can't* be that easy,” James seethed as he stalked ahead, following the spark of his own wand back to the dwarven tunnel. “No one simply walks into the cellars of Alma Aleron.”

Inexplicably, Zane snickered behind him.

“Ah,” Corsica said, turning to Zane and Nastasia, as if remembering they were there. “This is where we leave you. You will both accompany Madame Laosa to the surface. Good day to both of you.”

Zane’s grin transformed immediately into an alarmed frown. “You’re sending us with Crone La-er...” he caught himself and glanced behind him, spying the old woman’s pale face and blazing eyes as she hobbled up to them. “Er... *Madame* Laosa, I mean. And a more handsome and capable escort have I never met! Why, a delight! A pleasure, to be in the company of...” he coughed, running out of steam in the face of Laosa’s withering stare.

“Save it for the Chancellor,” she growled, her voice like sandpaper. “I’ve already sent word that I will be delivering you to the surface. In your present forms, unfortunately.”

“Oh thank God,” Zane declared, wiping his brow theatrically. “Lead on then, Madame Crone.”

Laosa ignored him. As she passed Tabitha Corsica, however, she pinned her with a steady, piercing gaze.

“You seem a far sight young to be a professor, my pretty,” she muttered, leaning close and narrowing her eyes. “There’s something about you that speaks of treachery.” She sniffed, as if scenting the air around Corsica, tasting her aura. Her thin lips curled into a tight smile. “I *understand* treachery.” She nodded. Then, with a swirl of her ancient, mouldy robes, she swept on, leading Nastasia and Zane into the shadows.

“We’ll talk,” Zane called, turning to trot backwards. “Have your people call my people!” He waggled his eyebrows and pantomimed talking on a Muggle telephone. James knew that he was talking about the Shard and nodded wearily.

“Shall we?” Corsica announced cheerfully. “Mr. Potter, you’ll take the lead, if you please. I have an excellent sense of direction, but it seems a waste not to utilize your Compass spell. Surprisingly intrepid of you, I daresay.”

“Stop calling me Mr. Potter,” James said, his voice echoing as he ducked into the cramped dwarven tunnel. “You’re barely older than me. And you *aren’t* a full professor. You’re just a substitute.”

Corsica clucked her tongue behind him. “Sticks and stones, Mr. Potter...”

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Further back, Rose spoke up. “James is right. It *is* dead suspicious that we found you here, er, Professor. Seems awfully convenient just to say you followed us.”

“Alas,” Corsica answered, “I should thank you and your friends for *making* it so terribly convenient for me. Following James and Mr. Dolohov from the greenhouse was no challenge. Spying the rest of you skulking outside the Great Hall was even easier. And slipping into the Great Hall to spy on you was a mere matter of timing and misdirection.”

“It was you,” James sighed, “you were the person we heard slipping through the doors right before Zane and Nastasia showed up.”

“She didn’t sneak in after us, you git,” Scorpius’ voice came out of the darkness. “She cast a diversion-- the noise of the main doors opening-- to get us to look backwards while she ducked in through the teacher’s entrance up by the head table.”

“I see there is some Slytherin in you after all, Mr. Malfoy,” Corsica said indulgently. “Like your father, and his father before him. A proud lineage, every one. Until you, of course.”

“Oh dear me,” Scorpius commented loudly. “Tabitha Corsica thinks I’m a disappointment. However will I bear the shame?”

“It’s Professor Corsica,” the tall girl corrected, her voice going hard. “Don’t forget that all of you are in terrible trouble. Mr. Filch will have to invent entirely new spells to discipline the four of you. Unless he leaves it up to me, of course. He has been quite busy of late.”

“So how did you know to ask about the Morrigan Web?” Surprisingly, it was Ralph who asked this, his voice strained as he navigated the cramped tunnel, bringing up the rear.

“Ah, Mr. Dolohov,” Corsica sighed. “You and your friends talk quite a lot, and rather loudly. You made your purpose here very clear-- to seek out someone known as Crone Laosa and interview her about something called the Morrigan Web. Once I followed you through the cabinet, I simply circumnavigated you, passing ahead as you lot argued about how to proceed. Finding Madame Laosa was a no challenge-- her purpose here, as you’ve seen, is to confront trespassers. Once I identified myself as a professor and ambassador of Hogwarts, she welcomed me into her quarters. As, apparently, you witnessed. The real question,” she changed her tone, making it low and suspicious, “is why a group of students is seeking information about a magical weapon of terror.”

“We’re students,” Scorpius said blandly. “We’re hungry to learn.”

“The Headmaster may find such hunger very suspect,” Corsica replied immediately. “If you haven’t noticed, he tends to be on the suspicious side.”

Torchlight flickered ahead. James followed it down a series of worn stone steps, finally coming out into the larger, older corridor of the Gowrow. He stopped, spying the iron barricade ahead.

“How’d you get around that?” he asked with a frown.

“She Apparated past it,” Rose sighed, coming alongside and stretching her spine.

“What about the monster?” he asked, turning to glare back at Corsica. “Even if *you* snuck past it once, *we* almost became dinner. If anything, it’s even hungrier now.”

“I don’t see it,” Rose said, approaching the iron door carefully and peeking through the bars.

Corsica was unfazed. “If you were nearly devoured, it was because you were clumsy and noisy. I slipped past because I am stealthy. If we remain quiet-- a challenging feat for the lot of you, I admit-- we shall have no problems with the Gowrow. Although,” she added speculatively, “I did rather wish to see it. Was it red?”

“It was green,” Scorpius answered. “Green with orange eyes.”

“Ah, those are the especially vicious ones,” Corsica nodded, impressed. “But such is life. Shall we?”

“We can’t unlock the door,” Ralph said, almost challengingly. “We had to destroy it and repair it afterward.”

“Of *course* one cannot magically unlock dwarven doors,” Corsica chided. “Dwarves are far too clever. And frankly I am surprised you were able to open it by force. But no matter. My method will suffice. I cannot Apparate to the cavern below-- we simply do not know it well enough to avoid splinching. But this...”

She vanished with a crack, reappearing several feet down the corridor, on the other side of the iron barricade.

“...is simplicity in itself,” she finished with a cold smile. “I shall return for you, one by one, using side-along Apparition to--”

“Protego Maxima!”

There was a sudden flash of light. A pulse of magic appeared before James, separating him from the barricade. Next to him, Rose

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recoiled in surprise from the sudden wall of shimmering blue light. Glancing aside in alarm, James was shocked to see Ralph standing straight, his wand outstretched and his face grim.

“Shield charm,” he said firmly, his dark eyes glaring at Corsica. “The strongest one of all. You taught it to me yourself, Tabitha, my first year, when I was in your Fang and Talons club. Do you remember?”

“I do,” Corsica answered, cocking her head. “I have to admit, Dolohov, I didn’t think you had it in you to use it. Especially not like this. What are you up to?”

Ralph ignored her question. “Tell us what the third key is,” he demanded. “The third thing that identifies the Morrigan Web. Tell us and I’ll drop the shield charm.”

“Ralph?” James asked, shocked at the sudden ferocity on his friend’s face. “What about the... you know?”

“Don’t worry, James,” Corsica smiled. “Mr. Dolohov doesn’t have the courage to follow through on his threat. The shield will drop before the Gowrow returns.” She turned back to Ralph. “Don’t be ridiculous. You and I both know you aren’t Slytherin enough to do this. It is folly.”

“Tell us the third secret of the Morrigan Web,” Ralph demanded again, brandishing his wand more firmly.

Tentatively, Corsica reached through the bars of the barricade. She winced as her fist passed into the shimmering blue light. “Not bad, Mr. Dolohov,” she admitted, gritting her teeth with effort. “But I can still force my hand through. I taught you better than this.”

“Try forcing your whole body through,” Ralph suggested. “We’ll be taking you home in a paper sack.”

“*You* can perform a *Protega Maxima*?” Scorpius asked Ralph, impressed. “So we can pass through from this side, but she can’t get back from hers?” He frowned. “Why didn’t we use *that* against the Gowrow?”

“It takes great power to block anything larger than a person,” Corsica answered. “And despite the size of Mr. Dolohov’s wand, he is *not* a wizard of great power. Drop the shield, boy, and let us leave this place. I won’t ask again.”

“Neither will I,” Ralph stated coldly. Raising the fingers of his left hand to his mouth, he whistled piercingly. The noise of it rang along the corridor.

In response, a dull roar, faint with distance, echoed out of the dark.

“Ralph,” Rose squeaked suddenly, her eyes going wide. “What are you doing?”

Corsica smiled. “I won’t answer your question, Mr. Dolohov. You will look a fool when you falter. And you *will* falter. Lower the charm now and perhaps we may salvage a shred of what passes for your dignity.”

Ralph merely glared at the witch on the other side of the barricade, his face stony, shining in the light of the shimmering shield charm.

“He won’t let her get eaten,” Rose quavered, tugging James’ sleeve. “Will he?”

“No one knows she’s here,” Scorpius replied thoughtfully. “If she were never to return, no one would have the slightest idea we had anything to do with it. Frankly, I could imagine letting the beast eat her whether she answers the question or not.”

“Shut up, Scorpius,” Ralph said, renewing his grip on his wand. “Time is running out, Tabitha.”

Sure enough, the stone floor seemed to vibrate with the rumble of the Gowrow’s approach. It roared again, much closer this time, ending in the terrible, inhuman shrieking that made James’ hair stand up.

“You are making a fool of yourself,” Corsica answered coldly. She stepped closer to the iron barricade, peering through it with stubborn determination. “You never had strength of conviction. That’s why you failed in the All School Debate. That’s why you persist in clinging to those of weak judgment and simplistic ethic. You are a large boy with a tiny mind. Desist now before I am forced to break you.”

Ralph did not flinch. “It’s coming, Tabitha.”

“Ralph,” James muttered nervously. “We can figure out what we need to know elsewhere. You don’t have to do this.”

Rose nodded fervently. “James is right!” She lowered her voice to a mortified hush. “Ralph, you’re attacking a *teacher!*”

“She’s no teacher,” Ralph replied, disgust oozing from his voice. “She’s a mad, twisted little girl with delusions of greatness. Her best weapon is the arrogance that no one will challenge her. Faced with real opposition, she crumbles.”

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“I’d answer his question if I was you,” Scorpius commented idly, stepping close to the barricade. “I think he’s going to do it. He’s crazy mad at you. You can see that, right?”

Dust sifted from the ceiling as the floor shuddered. The Gowrow was very close.

“Scorpius,” Rose warned. “Get back from the shield. Remember, she can--”

It happened so quickly that James barely saw it. Rose reached to pull Scorpius back from the edge of the shimmering blue shield. Tabitha Corsica, however, had anticipated this. She shot her arm between the iron bars of the barricade, rammed it through Ralph’s shield charm, and grasped Rose’s wrist in an iron grip. A flat *CRACK* struck the air and Rose vanished along with Tabitha Corsica. An instant later, both of them reappeared ten feet further along the corridor, standing amidst the dwarf skulls and broken bits of armour. Rose gasped in shock, realizing that she’d been side-along Apparated through the shield to the other side of the barricade. Corsica pushed Rose away and straightened, her icy eyes still glaring at Ralph.

“I warned you, Mr. Dolohov,” she said. “Now lower the shield.”

“Ralph!” Rose cried, running back toward the barricade and wrapping her fists around its bars.

“Tell us the third key to the Morrigan Web!” Ralph demanded, his face suddenly strained. His temples glistened with sweat.

“I won’t,” Corsica answered firmly. “You’ve lost. Lower the shield.”

The Gowrow roared again. Its shadow appeared at the end of the corridor, slithering and flailing just around the bend.

Rose’s eyes were wide and terrified. She spun around, throwing her back against the bars of the barricade and staring back toward the approaching shadow.

“It’s over, Ralph!” James shouted, grabbing his friend’s shoulder and shaking him. “Let them back through!”

Scorpius nodded. “He’s right. Drop it, *Dolohov*.”

But Ralph did not. His arm was like a statue, gripping his wand and maintaining the shimmering blue wall.

“It’ll eat you first,” he said, his eyes narrowing at Corsica.

Corsica shrugged impatiently. “And then who will take poor Miss Weasley to the other side of the barricade? You? Do you want to watch her die because you were stupid enough to challenge me?”

The Gowrow appeared. It struck the wall as it flung itself around the bend, furiously brandishing its tusks and teeth. Tabitha Corsica did not look back at it.

“Ralph!” Rose screamed over her shoulder.

Ralph lowered his wand. The shimmering blue curtain fell away.

Tabitha Corsica strode forward, gripped Rose’s upper arm, and vanished with a crack. The Gowrow slammed onto their footprints, gnashing its teeth in dumb rage. Frustrated and starved, it thrashed forward and hurled itself against the barricade. The iron screeched at the impact, rattling in its old moorings but holding firm.

Rose grabbed James from behind, panting with terror and clinging to his arm.

“Stupefy,” Tabitha Corsica’s voice called. A flash of red struck Ralph in the back, knocking him to his knees. He dropped his wand and crumpled to the stone floor unconscious.

“Poor Dolohov,” Corsica muttered, stepping out of the shadows and nudging Ralph with her foot. “He never should have tried. He really shouldn’t have.”

James almost struck out at Corsica with his own wand. He glared at her, then at the unconscious shape of Ralph on the floor.

“Don’t,” Scorpius muttered, sensing James’ thoughts. “It’s over.”

“Malfoy shows sense,” Tabitha agreed with sigh. “For once.”

Rose shuddered as the Gowrow threw itself against the barricade again, clanging against the iron with its curved tusks, its claws clattering viciously against the stone walls.

Scorpius shook his head. “It really was a good gambit,” he admitted, ignoring the tall witch and her pointing, threatening wand. He shook his head. “Pity it just didn’t work.”



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19. HAGRID'S DETENTION

The next several days were filled with the worst sort of anxiety.

The return trip out of the Alma Aleron cellars had been almost disappointingly uneventful. With the Gowrow trapped on the other side of the iron barricade, Tabitha Corsica had simply entranced it with a child's lullaby charm until it fell into a deep, snoring sleep. Sneaking past it had been silently hair-raising, but relatively easy. Ralph, the last to be side-along apparated past the barricade, had resumed consciousness by then, although his wand had been confiscated by Corsica until the return to Hogwarts.

No one had spoken during the entire return trip, knowing the worst was yet to come.

Since then, Tabitha Corsica had surely told Headmaster Grudje everything that had happened. James didn't know which detail boded the worst for them: that they'd been searching for information about a magical super weapon, or that they had attacked a professor in the process, threatening to feed her to a monster if she didn't reveal what she knew.

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This would not be merely a matter of punishment, James knew. This would surely result in expulsion, or worse.

“Ralph here will get the brunt of it,” Scorpius whispered as they huddled at a table in the library late one night, ostensibly studying. “He’s the one that pulled a wand on Corsica. Not us. Besides, it seems she’s had a bat in her bonnet about him for years.”

“Even so, we can’t just let him take the blame,” James said, keeping his head lowered over his History of Magic essay.

Scorpius shrugged. “I’m pretty fine with it, actually.”

“I don’t care what happens to me,” Ralph muttered morosely. “Maybe it’d be best if I did get expelled. I could go back to my dad. Together we could tell the Order what we know.”

“Nobody’s getting expelled if we can help it,” James said, with rather more determination than he felt.

“That’s all well and good,” Scorpius said with a low, humourless chuckle. “But Grudje doesn’t seem to have any trouble getting rid of the people he wants gone. He’s already eliminated Revalvier, Longbottom and McGonagall.”

“And let’s not forget,” Ralph added darkly, “Professor McGonagall ended up in St. Mungo’s after being attacked by a bunch of W.U.L.F lunatics.”

“Ugh! It’s the suspense that I can’t stand!” Rose rasped, gripping her Astronomy textbook so hard that it vibrated. “I just wish they’d get it over with!”

James understood his cousin’s fears, and yet there seemed to be nothing for it but to wait. For her own part, Tabitha Corsica seemed to enjoy their prolonged anxiety. At the following Herbology lesson she favoured James and Ralph with a long glare and a subtly threatening smile.

Finally, on Monday morning, Filch gathered James, Ralph, Rose and Scorpius after breakfast, herding them brusquely toward the headmaster’s office, muttering under his breath while Mrs. Norris hissed at their heels. Dread settled slowly in James’ stomach as they ascended the spiral stairs and approached the closed office door. Filch rapped on it with his knuckles.

Putting an obsequious lilt into his voice that sounded as authentic as a tin galleon, he called, “The students you requested, headmaster.”

Grudje's voice rumbled through the door, which creaked open of its own accord. "Do send them in, Mr. Caretaker."

Filch glared at the four students, pressing his lips into a mean, harried grimace. "In with you, then! Don't keep the headmaster waiting!"

He shoved James on the shoulder, hurrying him along. As the four shuffled reluctantly into Grudje's office, the door swung shut with a resounding slam, leaving Filch in the antechamber.

Grudje sat at his enormous desk, writing with a huge white quill, ignoring the students as they stood nervously as far back as possible. The office was as drab and cold as before, with no fire lit in the hearth and the window covered with a heavy velvet curtain, allowing only the faintest grey light to filter into the gloom. Glancing around, James was curious to see that the portrait of Merlinus Ambrosius had been hung despite its all-too-noticeable lifelessness. Perhaps even more curious, the nearby portrait of Albus Dumbledore was completely empty, showing only a dark chair, lost in shadow. Something about it implied that this was not unusual. The chair almost looked dusty, as if it had been undisturbed for quite some time.

Grudje stirred, bringing James back to the moment. A single candle guttered on the headmaster's desk, making an orb of light that left the rest of the office dense with shadows.

"Professor Corsica tells me a rather astonishing tale," he said without looking up. His quill scratched busily. "She tells me that the four of you managed to sneak into the cellars beneath the American Wizarding school of Alma Aleron, assisted by your cohort, Mr. Walker."

James shuffled his feet. He opened his mouth to offer some defence, but realized that the headmaster had not actually asked for any.

"Ms. Corsica showed professorial foresight in sensing that a plot was afoot," Grudje went on, his gravelly voice calm and cold. "Of course, I myself was not in the least surprised when she informed me of what transpired."

"Headmaster," Rose said suddenly, stepping forward. "We--"

Grudje silenced her with a raised left hand, its palm as white as a fish's belly in the candlelight. His eyes flicked up from his parchment, pinning her from beneath grey eyebrows. "I am not interested in your explanation, Ms. Weasley. Do hold your tongue, for your own sake,

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unless I ask you to speak.” He waited, assuring that she meant to obey. Rose took half a step backward and lowered her head.

Grudje observed this stoically. Finally, he lowered his quill and gave the students his full attention. “The four of you have been seen on several occasions banding about, engaging in hushed conversations and secret congress. This is against the rules, as you well know, but I have allowed it. Why, you may well ask? Because I was curious to know what you were up to. Now, however, you have passed beyond even my patient indulgence. Ms. Corsica has confirmed this. As a result, I can no longer allow you to thwart the rules of this establishment.”

He paused, shifting his glare from student to student, marking all four of them.

Scorpius cleared his throat softly. “Are we,” he asked, cocking his head inquisitively, “expelled? Sir?”

Grudje flicked his eyes back to Scorpius. “Expelled, Mr. Malfoy?” he repeated. “Do you believe you are deserving of expulsion?”

James glanced at Scorpius, but the blonde boy did not return his look. “No, sir. Not this time. Just trying to be clear, sir.”

“You may indeed deserve expulsion,” Grudje said, raising his chin speculatively. “And perhaps I should make it so, despite the lack of a concrete reason. Your secret counsels here at Hogwarts have been suspect enough. But to take your meetings to Alma Aleron, to its most clandestine locations, completely outside the realm of our supervision, that I simply cannot allow.” The old man sighed deeply, still ticking his gaze from face to face. “As you now know, Ms. Corsica was intrepid enough to follow you. She briefed me on everything she witnessed: your clandestine meeting in the caverns, adjourning your cabal of malcontents. She tells me that she listened intently, hidden in the shadows. And she tells me, rather unfortunately, that despite her best efforts... she was unable to overhear your secrets.”

James stared at the headmaster, his mind spinning. Tabitha had not told the headmaster everything! He could scarcely bring himself to believe it. Was this, perhaps, a trick? Was he teasing them? Dimly, he realized that Grudje was glaring at him, silently measuring his response.

“Oh,” James said suddenly, groping to sound angry, offended, anything. “Er. That sneak! Why, I can’t believe she listened in on us...!”

Grudje pressed his lips into a thin, sceptical line. "Is there anything," he growled slowly, "that you would like to tell me, Mr. Potter?"

"Anything to tell you," James repeated, his face burning red. "Er..."

"I think I *know* what this secret counsel of yours was about, young man," Grudje interrupted impatiently, picking up his quill again. "There is no need to lie. It will only make matters worse for you. Admit it and I may let you off easily. Relatively speaking."

"Er," James said again, glancing desperately from Ralph to Scorpius. "Er..."

Scorpius sighed. "Night Quidditch, sir," he said resignedly. He hung his head.

James held his breath, his eyes wide.

Grudje's eyes were like chips of ice as he watched Scorpius, suspicion rolling off him in waves. The moment seemed to last hours. Finally, the headmaster sat back and nodded, eyes narrowed.

"Thank you, Mr. Malfoy. I am pleased that one of you, at least, shows enough sense to speak up. Such truly inane foolishness, this Night Quidditch. After the dismissal of Mr. Longbottom, I assumed it would naturally come to an end. Apparently my expectations for good sense are too lofty for some of you."

With an imperious flourish, he signed his name to the parchment on his desk. "This, students, is the terms of your probation. According to it, none of you shall be seen interacting with the other at any time. No two of you will study together, sit next to each other in lessons, or engage in conversation during lessons or private hours. If you do so, believe me, I shall know, and there will be no further warnings. Breaking the terms of this probation will result in immediate expulsion from this school. Have I made myself exceedingly clear?"

Next to James, Ralph and Scorpius nodded. Rose muttered assent. James took a small step forward.

"Just curious, Headmaster," he said, steeling his nerve. "How will you know if we break the probation?"

Grudje regarded him before answering. "Surely you don't expect me to answer that question, Mr. Potter."

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James' cheeks burned. "I... thought I might ask, sir. If we knew that there really was no place to sneak off to, I just thought it might help us to, you know, avoid temptation. We're, sort of, incorrigible that way."

"I have my ways, young man," Grudje said dismissively, returning his attention to the parchment before him. "I do not need to explain my methods to assure you that there is no part of this school beyond my benevolent eye. You should thank me for this. By my vigilance, I may yet save you from your worst enemy: yourself."

"Yes, sir," James answered, stepping back and pretending to be mollified. "Er, thank you, sir." He lowered his eyes, but his mind was suddenly racing.

Grudje tapped the probation notice with his wand, creating a small stack of exact duplicates. "I shall distribute these to your teachers, heads of houses, and prefects within the hour. For now, you may return to your lessons. And please, let there be no talking along the way. I will know if you disobey."

"Yes, sir," James said again, more emphatically this time. His eyes were narrow with growing suspicion as he stared at the floor.

Behind them, the headmaster's door creaked open again, announcing their dismissal. Silently, Scorpius led the other three from the room, quickening his pace as he reached the antechamber. Four sets of footsteps rang on the spiral stairs as they descended.

James knew that what he should be feeling most was relief. For some reason, Tabitha Corsica had not told Headmaster Grudje the most damning parts of their trip to the cellars of Alma Aleron-- neither the bit about the Morrigan Web nor the part where Ralph had threatened her with toothy monster death. Normally, Corsica would like nothing more than to see James, Ralph and his friends kicked out of the school, humiliated and defamed. Why she had avoided such a golden opportunity was a mystery of truly epic proportions. As he stalked along the corridor making for the stairs, he sensed Rose's eyes on him, expressing her own surprise and shock at this inexplicable development.

And yet what James was feeling most was a sudden, vindictive certainty.

As he reached the top of the stairs, he glanced back, assuring that Grudje had not followed them. The halls were completely empty, punctuated only by the dull, echoing warble of classes in progress behind closed doors. Satisfied, James turned to a very large painting that

overlooked the staircase. The painting depicted a group of witches reclined around a boiling cauldron, most sipping enormous tankards or dozing in the morning sunlight.

"It's you, isn't it?" he whispered harshly, leaning close and addressing a tall but otherwise nondescript witch in the background. "You're the one spying for Grudje. Admit it."

The witch regarded James sternly, defiantly, offering no response.

"James!" Rose hissed, pulling on his sleeve. "Come *on!* What are you doing?"

"You look rotten as a witch, you know," James went on, ignoring his cousin. "You can't fool me now that I know what to look for. The whole school is lousy with paintings of you. You're the gardening monk in the greenhouse painting in Professor Longbottom's sitting room. You're the knight in Professor McGonagall's portrait of King Kreagle. It's you who's spying for Grudje, telling everyone's secrets. Admit it."

Rose boggled at James, and then leaned to look closer at the painting. Scorpius joined her, putting on his glasses and squinting through them. Ralph nodded over James' shoulder.

"You're right!" he said, realization dawning on him. "Blimey, he does look awful as a witch."

"Oh, do step back, the four of you," the witch said in a strangely low, drawling voice. "And consider investing in a good anti-pimple potion."

"Headmaster *Snape?*" Rose breathed in an awed voice. She suppressed a giggle. "Is that really... er, you?"

The painted figure sighed irritably. "I see you are as good at keeping secrets, Potter, as you are potion making. Make your way to your classes, the lot of you, before you get yourselves into even worse trouble."

"How can you be helping him?" James demanded furiously. "I thought you were our friend!"

The costumed visage of Snape sneered at James. "I have never been your 'friend', Potter. I am, however, one of your guardians, and for that you should thank me. Headmaster Grudje is quite right. You need someone to save you from your own disregard for the rules and pathological delusions of grandeur. I am all too willing to assist in that endeavour."

Rose looked both shocked and crestfallen. "It's you, sir?" she clarified, glancing from the painting to James and back. "You've got

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portraits scattered all over the school? And you're using them to spy on everyone for Headmaster Grudje?"

"‘Spying’ is a subversive term," Snape sniffed. "I am obliged to offer the entirety of my services to the new headmaster. As a result, I have been charged with observing. Those with nothing to hide have nothing to fear."

James shook his head. "Because of you, we've lost Revalvier, McGonagall and Longbottom!"

"I had nothing to do with any of their predicaments," Snape glanced away dismissively. "Each of those professors earned their own removal. If you disagree, take it up with the Headmaster. It is none of my affair."

Rose's disappointment was quickly boiling into anger. "Everyone's living in fear because of you!" she declared, struggling to keep her voice low. "Good people-- people who were your friends and comrades-- are afraid to speak up against what's going on, all because you're broadcasting their every word to Grudje!"

"That's *Headmaster* Grudje, and it behooves you to remember it, Miss Weasley" Snape declared, rising to his full height in the painting. "Like it or not, he is in charge, now, and things will be done according to his design. Those who chafe under that requirement are, by definition, unfit to serve under his leadership, regardless of their history, either with me *or* this school."

"But," Ralph frowned sadly, "Professor McGonagall got attacked. She's still in St. Mungo's. All because somebody wanted to keep her quiet. Maybe even Headmaster Grudje. Is that who you want to work for?"

"Conjecture and hearsay," Snape retorted under his breath, but James could see that this had struck a nerve with the painted former headmaster. He moved closer to the painting and lowered his voice.

"You don't have any choice in the matter," he whispered. "Do you? You *have* to do what Grudje wants. Because, being dead, you don't really have free will any longer..."

Snape refused to meet James' eyes. "As usual, Potter, you speak as if you know what you are talking about. And also as usual, you do not."

"Just like the portrait of Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black," Rose nodded slowly. "My mum says he had to do what Headmaster

Dumbledore asked, whether he liked it or not. All the old headmaster portraits are honour bound to serve the living headmaster. Phineas Nigellus seemed to think it was a curse more than a duty.”

Snape glared at Rose from the painting. “None of you have the slightest idea what you are talking about. Move along. Go to your classes.”

“It must drive you mad,” Scorpius mused. “Having to do what that crazy dictator wants. After everything you did when you were alive to shut down people like him.”

“I *was* people like him,” Snape countered. “Men like Headmaster Grudje are the tip of the spear, the ugly truth that few are willing to acknowledge. Without men like him-- without men like *me*-- neither the wizarding nor Muggle worlds could survive.”

“But you *weren't* like him,” Rose persisted softly. “You knew that power was nothing without wisdom and... well, love. That’s why Dumbledore trusted you. That’s why Uncle Harry named his second son after you.”

Snape shook his head, breaking his gaze. “Off to your classes with you. Do not speak as you go. Your probations are in effect, and Headmaster Grudje is right: he will know if you disobey.”

James hitched a long, disconsolate sigh. Disgusted, he turned away and began to tromp down the stairs. After a moment, Rose turned to follow, as did Scorpius and Ralph.

“It is a terrible shame,” Snape’s voice commented faintly, apparently to itself, “that I never did manage to get a portrait into that damned Room of Requirement.”

James stopped in mid-step, glancing back over his shoulder. The others crowded behind him, coming to a messy halt. Scorpius’ eyes sharpened, registering what the painting seemed to imply.

“Did you just say, sir,” he asked, “that you have no portrait in the Room of Requirement?”

Snape’s voice was low and cunning. “I *said* that you should all get to your lessons before I have to report you.”

“I see, sir,” Scorpius answered. “Certainly, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Turning and sharing a collection of secretive grins, the students continued their tromp down the staircase. As they reached the bottom, they split up, Rose and Scorpius turning right for Transfiguration with the

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new Professor Tofty, Ralph and James heading out into the morning sun in search of Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures, already in progress.

The portrait of Severus Snape sighed in his painting, relaxing once again into the background. "Damn," he muttered to himself darkly. "Phineas Nigellus was right."



At breakfast the following Monday morning, with less than two weeks left of term, Headmaster Grudje finally announced the upcoming Quidditch Summit.

"In ten days," he rumbled in his standard monotone, "this school will be host to an event of historic importance. For the first time in nearly a thousand years, Muggle and Magical leaders will meet officially, here in these very halls."

Most of the students had heard about this event by now, despite the restricted post and news blackout. Still, with the official announcement, the room descended into a buzz of animated whispers. Grudje allowed this for a moment before going on.

"We are all quite aware of the reasons behind this meeting. After many centuries of peaceful concealment, the wall of secrecy that has protected our worlds has been breached. Even now, despite our best efforts, it continues to crumble. Magical enforcement of the Vow of Secrecy is increasingly erratic. Unfortunately, some less scrupulous Witches and wizards have begun to take advantage of this. Conversely, intrepid or unfortunate Muggles have begun to infiltrate worlds that have been, for a millennium, beyond their reach. Some of you, I am quite sure, have heard the tale of the ill-fated Muggle family that inadvertently stumbled into Knockturn Alley by way of an unguarded portal."

A smatter of mean laughter peppered the hall, mostly emanating from the Slytherin table. James had indeed heard the tale, as had everyone else. A trio of hags had discovered the family of four hiding behind a pile of trash bins, hopelessly lost and trembling with terror at the sight of the milling witches, goblins, and various nefarious creatures that frequented Knockturn Alley's shadowy corners. It had taken a week of memory modifications at St. Mungo's to undo the damage, and even then the father had continued to suffer from an irrational terror of warts.

"It has become necessary, therefore," Grudje went on, "to involve our Muggle brothers and sisters in the management of affairs from this point onward. Along with representatives of the Ministry of Magic and other magical administrations, a careful selection of ambassadors and leaders from Muggle governments worldwide will descend upon this school for the advent of the final Quidditch match between Slytherin and Hufflepuff..."

At the mention of their names, both the Slytherin and Hufflepuff tables erupted into raucous applause. Grudje's face paled and his eyes narrowed.

"*This is not an occasion for petty house loyalties,*" he declared with surprising volume, quelling the applause. The hoots and handclapping fell away, reducing the hall to awkward silence as Grudje frowned at the tables, the weight of his gaze like a cold wind. In a low, severe voice, he continued. "These are very serious times, pupils. The gravity of this summit is heavy upon us. We have been chosen to represent the entirety of the magical world. Our task is to show that witches and wizards are not threats to be feared, but friends and helpers, partners in a new world of peaceful coexistence. As such, many of you will be chosen as amateur diplomats. You will both serve and entertain our Muggle guests at events in their honour, held at various locations throughout the school.

"Most importantly, however, will be the display of magical competition and camaraderie that is the Quidditch tournament. This will be the keynote of the summit, and will involve each and every one of you. You will attend, and you will be on your best behaviour. Whomever wins, we shall all display the greatest respect, deference, and school spirit. And in the end, our Muggle guests will know that we are a culture they need not fear. Indeed, they will be welcomed and disarmed by our combined sportsmanship and magical heritage."

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Grudje paused, his cold eyes still roaming over the hall, measuring each face. Finally, he relaxed slightly. “On a happier note, however, this term’s Quidditch tournament will also be witness to the unveiling of an all new tournament trophy, the soon-to-be-coveted Crystal Chalice, presented via the generous donation of Mr. and Mrs. Draven Vassar, parents of our own Lance Vassar of Gryffindor. The Chalice, an ancient and immensely rare magical relic discovered by the Vassars in the course of their historical explorations, will serve as an enduring symbol of excellence for centuries to come. How fortunate will be the first winner to bear such a legacy.”

With that, Grudje favoured the hall with one of his rare, ghastly smiles.

“Ugh,” Rose muttered, cupping a hand to the side of her face to block the sight. “It looks like magical fish hooks are tugging at the corners of his mouth.”

Graham Warton’s face was pale with anger as a smattering of applause rippled through the Hall. “Isn’t it just like Lance Vassar to lose us the Quidditch cup and then produce some even better cup to award the winner.”

James was distracted, however, by the chilling certainty of Grudje’s announcement. Until now, the Quidditch Summit had seemed like a disturbing but nebulous premonition-- something that simply might not happen if he only refused to believe it. Now, it was not only a concrete reality, it was less than two weeks away. And worst of all, despite what they had learned during their misadventure in the cellars of Alma Aleron, they didn’t seem any closer to unravelling the mystery of the Morrigan Web.

With the announcement, the final days of term seemed to trickle by with eerie, capricious speed. This was due in large part to the typical end of term rush of examinations, accompanied by the mountains of homework that continued to be piled on. James tried heroically to attend to his studies and keep on top of homework, not so much for the sake of his grades but simply to stay out of Filch’s way. Even now, the old Caretaker was assigning crushing detentions to students who failed to turn in their assignments, which only succeeded in taking more time from their homework and studies, leading to even more detentions. The unfairness of it was all too infuriating, offset only slightly by the fact that Filch

himself seemed the most harried of all, driven as he was by the increasingly demanding expectations of Headmaster Grudje.

As the days slipped by, James arranged fleetingly brief meetings with Rose, Ralph, Scorpius and sometimes even Albus, Zane and Nastasia in the Room of Requirement, which he had learned how to access back in his first year, thanks to his father. During the meetings, the Room of Requirement presented itself as a small command centre, complete with Sneakoscopes and a Foe-Glass, a library of books on magical spying and espionage, and a large plotting table bearing a map of Hogwarts and the surrounding grounds. Despite these tools, the gathering was consistently frustrated in their attempts to work out how the attack on the Quidditch Summit might happen, much less how to prevent it.

“Even if we knew Avior’s plan,” Scorpius declared finally, “The pitch will be absolutely crawling with guards.”

Albus nodded grimly. “Titus Hardcastle will be in charge of security. Nothing gets past him. He’ll have all the Aurors on high alert, especially after the disaster over the holidays when the American vice president was killed.”

“Will Uncle Harry not be there at all?” Rose asked.

James shook his head. “The Minister of Magic will probably have dad scheduled to count cauldrons in some warehouse in Siberia or something. They’re going out of their way to keep him away from the action these days.”

“I never thought I’d say this,” Zane sighed, pushing the map away and leaning back in his chair. “But this is out of our hands. It was one thing when we faced off against loopy Madame Delacroix and even the Gatekeeper. Those were plots involving just a few powerful people working under the radar. This time it’s the whole Ministry of Magic and powerful people working right out in the open.”

“It’s *still* only a few people,” James persisted, pounding the table with a frustrated fist. “It’s Avior working alongside Judith, the Lady of the Lake. I don’t know how they met, but obviously they have the same goals in mind. He wants power over Muggles, she wants chaos and destruction. Either way, it’s still just the two of them.”

“It may only be the two of them with the wicked little plans,” Nastasia agreed breezily, “but they’ve got the whole brute force of your Ministry of Magic behind them, paving the way without even knowing it.”

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Ralph's face was stony with resolve. "We can't just give up, either way. We just need some help."

"Help from where?" Scorpius asked, meeting Ralph's eyes. "Anyone who knows enough to join us is either already gone or too squashed under Grudje's thumb to do anything about it."

Albus frowned. "Where's he at most of the time, anyway? How's he keep everyone so terrified when it seems like he's gadding about who knows where every other day?"

Ralph shrugged. "Probably meeting up with the Minister of Magic to give him his orders."

Rose's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. James regarded her curiously.

"What are you thinking, Rose?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. Just... something strange."

"The whole thing's strange," Zane sighed.

"What about all those Yuxa Baslatma vines and leaves and stuff that got caught up in your robes when the Jiskra was chasing us," James prodded, still watching Rose. "Maybe they'll tell us what we need to do if you just use them?"

"Rose has some Dream Inducers?" Ralph asked, sitting up hopefully.

"I already told you," Rose snapped, "Not a chance! They're all jumbled together and miss-matched. There's no way to know even which pots they came from. Nobody's using them, and *especially* not me. It's way too dangerous."

"Rose," James insisted intently. "If the Morrigan Web goes off at the Quidditch final, it'll kill every witch and wizard there! Players, students, Ministry people, guards, even Titus Hardcastle and his Aurors! We're seriously running out of options, here!"

But Rose was firm in her resolve. "Those Yuxa Baslatma fragments won't help us, James. They're too mixed up and torn apart. If I was smart I would just bury them somewhere and forget about them. But I do have an idea for how we can save at least a few people, and maybe even more than a few, if the Morrigan Web does go off. We just need to get started immediately."

"What, Rosie?" Zane asked eagerly, leaning forward again.

Rose looked from face to face. "It's too simple, really," she said. "The Web connects every wand in the vicinity with some sort of ultra

killing curse, right? We just go to the Quidditch final without our wands. Us and as many other people as we can convince.”

There was a moment of awed silence as everyone considered this. James nodded, remembering. “In Crone Laosa’s story, her mother survived by not having her wand with her. She’d broken it that morning in some sort of accident. She was right in the midst of the Web, but since she didn’t have a wand, it didn’t hurt her...”

Ralph, however, was sceptical. “Hard to imagine that the best way to go into magical battle is to leave your wand at home.”

Nastasia tittered.

“It is if you want to live to see the actual battle,” Rose countered, giving Nastasia a steely glance. “And I’m not suggesting we leave them back in the dormitories. I say we find a place to hide them nearby, perhaps beneath the grandstands or even the equipment shed, safely stowed but available to us afterwards.”

“That’s pretty grim, Rose” Albus said. “You’re suggesting we watch everyone else get murdered, then pick over their bodies to grab our wands and fight Avior and whatever bad guy squad he’s assembled?”

“You have a better idea?” Rose asked, clearly unhappy with the prospect herself. “We’ll need to protect the Muggle survivors. It’s not a perfect plan, but it’s all we’ve got at the moment.”

“This is worse than last year,” Ralph shook his head with slow emphasis. “It was bad enough when Lucy was killed and New Amsterdam was laid out there for all the Muggles to see. But this is just worse. This is like... like...”

“Like the end of our world,” James sighed morosely. “The end of Hogwarts. The end of the Ministry of Magic. It’ll be a massacre.”

“I can’t believe you lot are even considering this!” Albus suddenly declared. “Ralph already said it! We can’t just give up! We have to *stop* the Morrigan Web, not just figure out how to survive it like...” he waved his hands helplessly, “like *cockroaches!*”

This was followed by a long moment of awkward silence. James was sure that everyone was thinking the same thing, even if they could not bring themselves to say it. Uncomfortable glances were passed furtively around the room. *Stopping the Morrigan Web may well be impossible*, those glances said, *but surviving is better than dying*.

Thankfully, Scorpius spoke up, breaking the pause. “No one is giving up,” he said with a decisive nod. “But until we figure out

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something better, we do what we can to convince as many as people as possible to hide their wands away. We'll stow them in a trunk beneath the Gryffindor grandstand, and we'll do it hours before the tournament, before Hardcastle and his Aurors arrive as guards."

"We'll have to conceal the trunk somehow," James agreed. "Hardcastle's crew will sweep the pitch for anything suspicious."

"We could hide it under the invisibility cloak," Ralph suggested, brightening.

"We *could*," James agreed pointedly, "if Albus here hadn't left it lying on the floor of Avior's office."

"I didn't just *leave* it lying," Albus protested. "I was being chased by a mad two-headed, fire-breathing bird monster if you recall!"

Zane gave a low whistle. "You left your dad's prize invisibility cloak in the bad guy's office? Does he know?"

Albus deflated. "No. And neither does Filch, fortunately. We nicked it from his desk but he's been too swamped to notice."

Scorpius dismissed these concerns with a wave of his hand. "Either way, Ralph can put a *Visum Ineptio* charm on the trunk to make it look like a rock or something. He's good at that kind of magic. With all the wands hidden away, the Web can't hurt us."

Rose sighed deeply. "Then, if we fail to prevent it..." She swallowed hard. "We can protect the survivors: the Muggle government leaders that Avior and his people will try to assassinate once everyone else is dead."

"Bloody hell," Ralph murmured. "Merlin was right. This changes everything."

There was a rumble of grave agreement as the meeting broke up.

The next few days were some of the tensest days of James' life. One at a time, he, Ralph, Rose, Albus and Scorpius met with as many students as they dared trust, attempting to warn them of the impending attack. They refrained from referring to the Morrigan Web, since that would only incite scepticism or confusion, and either way demand lengthy explanations. Instead, they exploited the general sense of angry suspicion the entire school harboured toward Headmaster Grudje and his Draconian policies.

"I *knew* he was hiding something!" Graham hissed angrily as he and James threaded their way to the Astronomy tower. "You say he's covering for some big conspiracy?"

James nodded. “Something like that. The point is it’s absolutely essential that we all hide our wands before the Quidditch tournament. Seriously. Life and death.”

Graham glanced at him, not with scepticism, as James had expected, but grim awe. “What’s the old power-monger up to?” His mouth dropped open in shocked revelation. “He’s going to confiscate everyone’s wands next, isn’t he? First he clamps down on the post, then Hogsmeade weekends, and now he’s taking away our wands so we can only use them when he wants to let us! Of course! Why, that total dictator!”

James did not dissuade Graham from this suspicion. Frankly, it did seem like the sort of thing Grudje would do. “We’ll be collecting wands the night before the tournament and hiding them away. No one will find them.”

Graham nodded. “And then, when Grudje tries to confiscate them, boom, no wands to confiscate! And later, we can all collect them again. Brilliant! That’ll teach the old tyrant.”

James nodded and shrugged at the same time. He didn’t like lying to Graham, but not disabusing him of his own notions seemed acceptable under the circumstances. Unfortunately, most of the other students James spoke to were not as easily persuaded as Graham.

“I’m not going anywhere without my wand, James,” Mei Isis insisted stubbornly. “Not the way things have been going lately. Especially if, like you say, something terrible is going to happen at the tournament.”

Heth Thomas and Deirdre Finnegan felt the same way, seemingly caught between refusing to believe James’ warning, and feeling that even if it was true, their wands were their own best recourse.

“But your wand will *be* the weapon!” James insisted frantically.

“Of course my wand’s the weapon,” Deirdre rasped impatiently. “That’s the whole point! Have you even *been* to a Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson?”

By the time he cornered Gabriel Jackson, captain of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team, outside the Ancient Runes classroom, she had already heard rumours of James’ whispered warnings.

“None of the Hufflepuff players carry wands while in the air,” she assured him dismissively. “My own rule, ever since that incident my third year when my sister Julian got blindsided by one of Beetlebrick’s Bludgers

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and decided to fry him with a friendly Stunner in mid-air. Lost the match on a technicality that time. No way I'm going to let that happen again. No wands while the match is on."

James accepted this with a relieved sigh.

"Still," Gabriel mused thoughtfully. "Beetlebrick *did* deserve it. And he's never blindsided Julian again, I'll tell you that. Overall it was probably a net gain for the team. Maybe we should revise the no wands rule next year."

"You do that," James nodded. "Next year."

Rose, Ralph, Scorpius and Albus had had similar luck with their own contacts.

"Joseph Torrance and Cameron Creevey were easy," Rose muttered as she followed James into the Great Hall for dinner. "Joseph trusts you, and Cameron is your biggest fan. Lily and her friends will go along as well. No luck with Aloysius, Shivani or Penelope, though. Even worse with the Hufflepuffs who aren't playing in the tournament. They want to be able to celebrate with firework charms, the clueless morons."

James nodded gravely. Secretly, he couldn't blame the Hufflepuffs, or anyone else, for doubting their story. Without details, it sounded paranoid and stupid even to his own ears.

Scorpius, who could be surprisingly persuasive, and who had taught Defence club during his first year, had somewhat better luck, convincing almost half of the Ravenclaws to stow their wands the night before the tournament. Albus and Ralph, however, had made almost no headway with the Slytherins who, like the Hufflepuffs, were keen on magically celebrating their predicted win.

Still, with only four days left until the Quidditch Summit, they had convinced over a third of their fellow students to attend the tournament wandless. It wasn't much-- it was, in fact, horrifyingly unsatisfying-- but it was indeed better than nothing.

James and Ralph prepared an old Quidditch trunk to house the stowed wands, hiding it in the shadows beneath the Gryffindor grandstands and disguising it with one of Ralph's *Visum Ineptio* charms.

Walking away from it, James couldn't help feeling that, despite their best efforts, they were resigning themselves to watching most of their classmates killed before their eyes. It was a dreadful, harrowing thought. And yet, even now, he felt no closer to unravelling Avior's plan. Despite what they had learned in the cellars beneath Alma Aleron, they simply

could not guess how the Morrigan Web might be powered, or what form it might take. As the days crept by and preparations for the Summit loomed, a sense of deep, palpable dread settled in James' stomach.

This was worsened by the frustrations with not being able to meet in the open. Even the brief, secret conversations he, Rose, Ralph and Scorpius had engaged in while waiting in line for lessons or while navigating the halls between classes became too dangerous, as Filch seemed to have been charged with watching them specifically. He could regularly be seen hovering outside their classrooms, steely eyed and silently seething, gripping his black cane like a lifeline.

And then, strangest of all, at the last Care of Magical Creatures class of the term, Hagrid himself gave James, Ralph and Scorpius a detention.

"You lot," he called across the barnyard, his voice uncharacteristically gruff. "Talking during lesson, are yeh? Why that's the last straw. Detention for yeh!"

James straightened, his mouth dropping open in shock as foot-long purple salamanders ran pell mell about the yard, chased futilely by the other students. "What? Of course we're talking! We're trying to round up these crazy lizards you set us on!"

"Talkin' back, too," Hagrid frowned, his beard bristling. "Double detention then. Report back here tonight at dusk and not another word from any o' yeh."

James could scarcely believe his own ears. He turned to Ralph and Scorpius incredulously. Ralph shrugged while Scorpius merely rolled his eyes. James didn't know if he was more surprised or hurt by Hagrid's sudden antagonism. All he knew was that it contributed to what was already a thoroughly miserable day. This carried into the dinner hour as Lily displayed an official-looking parchment emblazoned with the Hogwarts crest.

"I've been chosen as a student ambassador!" she trilled happily, waving the parchment. "I get to attend the big dinner after the tournament! We'll be singing the Hogwarts salute from the head table and answering questions about the school. I'll get to meet presidents and queens and all sorts of important people!"

"Quit showing off," Graham muttered. "And don't remind us of the stupid Quidditch tournament. No collection of Muggle stuffed shirts is going to distract us from the fact that we aren't even competing this

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year. Stupid Lance Vassar. The gall of his parents, donating some stupid Chalice on a year there's no chance Gryffindor can win it. And it's all his bloody fault!"

"You can't lay all the blame at Lance's feet," Deirdre commented, frowning at Lance and his cronies further down the table. "James deserves a lot of the credit. If he'd shown up for try-outs--"

"We all know the story by now," James interrupted tersely. "Give it a rest already!"

James spent the rest of the evening in the Gryffindor common room, trying unsuccessfully to focus on his homework and studies. It was utterly useless.

At a nearby table, Rose sat with Shivani Yadev and Willow Wisteria, shooting him worried glances but unwilling to risk joining him for a chat. As the sun set outside the tall windows, James finally gave up and shut his books. He glared out the window, lost in feverish thoughts and mounting worry.

Finally, thankfully, Scorpius interrupted him.

"Detention," he said briskly. "With Hagrid, remember?"

James nodded, glad of the distraction, despite the worrisome mystery of Hagrid's behaviour.

Ralph met them on the landing, standing in the light of the Heracles window as the lowering sun shone through it, brilliantly illuminating the colourful stained glass. Silently, shoulders slumped, the three stepped out into the evening heat and deepening shadows. Crickets chirred from the depths of the Forbidden Forest as they made their way, as slowly as possible, toward Hagrid's hut.

"What do you suppose he has planned for us?" Ralph asked.

Scorpius muttered, "Probably scooping up dragon poo in the barn."

"Or worse," James agreed. "What do you think's gotten into him? He's never given us detention before."

"Maybe he decided he's still cross at you for dropping through his roof," Scorpius suggested idly.

James didn't think that was it, but had no better ideas.

A thin stream of white smoke issued from the hut as they entered its shadow. Scorpius knocked while Ralph and James waited in the garden.

When the door opened, Hagrid leaned out into evening air, regarding the three students sternly.

“Here yeh are, then!” he proclaimed, far louder than necessary. “And ‘bout time, too! Here!”

James frowned as Hagrid collected three large metal pails, pushing one each into his, Ralph’s and Scorpius’ hands.

“What’s this for, then?” Scorpius asked, his voice echoing in the huge bucket.

“Mushroom collecting fer Professor Heretofore,” Hagrid boomed, straightening. “Bursting mushrooms, that is. Sense motion, they do, and get agitated if threatened. Fail to cut their stems quick enough an’ they’ll explode with enough force to take off yer fingers.”

Ralph blinked at the half giant. “Seriously?”

“Never been more serious in m’ life,” Hagrid agreed. He produced three stubby knives from a pouch on his belt and clattered one each into the buckets. “Bursting mushrooms are red with white spots. You’ll recognize ‘em when they start a-swellin’. Use those blades to cut ‘em right at the stem, and like I said, be right quick about it.”

Scorpius peered worriedly into his pail. “Or else?”

“Or else yer detentions will end in the hospital wing,” Hagrid answered, his voice ringing over the garden. “Trife! Here boy!”

At the call of his name, Hagrid’s bullmastiff dog bounded noisily out of the forest.

“Atta boy,” Hagrid said, covering the dog’s head with his meaty hand and offering him a rough pat. “Been sniffing out some mushrooms, ‘ave yeh? But keepin’ a safe distance, I see! At’s my smart boy. Lead on, then.”

With that, Trife spun and bolted back toward the Forest again, turning impatiently as the others began to follow.

“No dawdlin’ now,” Hagrid announced, louder than ever, glancing back over his shoulder. “Sooner begun, sooner done.”

Accompanied by the clink and clank of the knives in their buckets, James, Ralph and Scorpius followed Hagrid into the descending gloom. Elephantine tree trunks spread out ahead of them, interspersed with waving ferns, lush vines, and the occasional fallen log and hillock. Trife bounded ahead, tracing a meandering trail deeper and deeper into the depths of the Forest.

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“When do you think we might start seeing these mushrooms, then,” Scorpius asked, peering around the shadows.

“Oh, soon enough, I expect,” Hagrid called back, his voice much lower than before.

James followed along nervously. He had been this deep into the Forbidden Forest on a few other occasions, but that did not diminish the general creepiness of it. The Forest was still home to the Centaurs, after all, as well as the scattered descendants of Arogog the Acromantula. Darkness lowered gradually, blotting out the leafy canopy overhead until shadows seemed to surround them, thick and worrisome. Hagrid, James realized, did not carry a lantern.

“How are we supposed to see these mushrooms, then, Hagrid?” he asked, trying to keep the shudder out of his voice.

“Hush now,” Hagrid replied, his own voice low. “We’re almost there.”

James was about to ask what in the world Hagrid meant when a flicker of firelight illuminated a circle of tree trunks ahead. Trife angled toward this, leaping happily through the underbrush. Hagrid followed the big dog approaching a line of tall bushes that surrounded a small clearing. Beyond the bushes, firelight crackled faintly, casting its yellow light up onto the leaves above.

Hagrid paused. Raising a hand to the side of his mouth, he produced an extremely unexpected, but very convincing, twitter of birdsong.

James frowned up at the big man.

Then, even more surprisingly, a familiar voice spoke from the other side of the brush.

“If this monstrous dog of yours wasn’t clue enough of your identity, Hagrid, the clanking of those buckets certainly was. All of you, come inside and join us.”

Hagrid harrumphed happily and turned back to James, Ralph and Scorpius. “Guess I could’a had you leave those buckets a mile or so back. Didn’ occur to me. I was so wrapped up in convincin’ anybody who might’a been listenin’ that I was givin’ yeh detentions. Sorry ‘bout that, by the way.”

James dropped his bucket with a clank and followed Hagrid around the edge of the nearest bush.

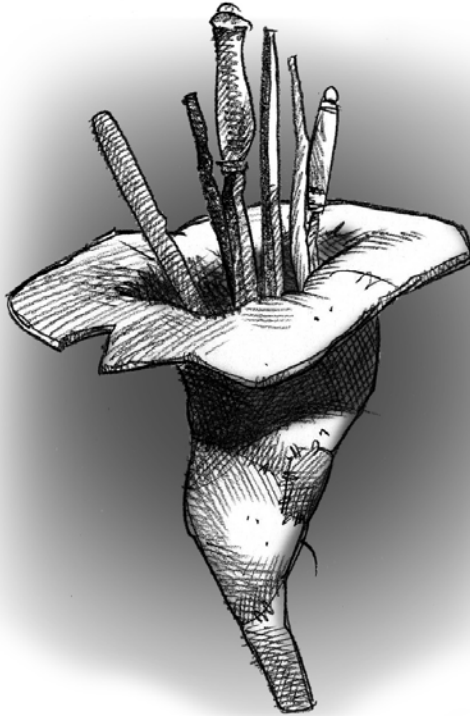
Seated before a small, tidy fire were Professors Flitwick, Debellows, and Revalvier. Completing the circle, smiling gravely at the newcomers, was Professor McGonagall her face pale in the firelight and a long scratch still healing on her cheek, alongside James' Uncle Ron, Aunt Hermione, and completing the scene, his glasses glinting in the firelight, his own father.

Harry Potter stood, welcoming Hagrid, Scorpius and Ralph. James ran to him, gratefully accepting the arm his father threw around his shoulders, giving him a hard, comforting squeeze.

“Welcome, gentlemen,” he announced in a low, clear voice, “to the new Order of the Phoenix.”



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20. TYRANNY OF FINAL DAYS

The sense of relief James felt at the sight of his father, uncle and aunt, along with the other members of the new Order, was nearly overwhelming.

A collection of heavy logs and smooth boulders had been levitated into position around the fire, forming a circle of benches. As Harry resumed his seat, James squeezed in next to him. Ralph plopped gratefully next to tiny Professor Flitwick, who was dressed in a traveling cloak and comically enormous leather boots, a floppy, wide-brimmed hat pulled low over his brow. Scorpius, however, remained standing, his arms crossed at the edge of the flickering firelight, since Hagrid's bulk occupied the entirety of the remaining boulder.

"Shall I summon you a log, Mr. Malfoy?" Flitwick offered cheerfully, producing his wand.

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Scorpius shook his head. “I’ll stand if you don’t mind, until I know a bit more about what this is all about.”

“Oh, he looks so much like his father at that age,” Hermione smiled wistfully, nudging her husband.

“I can see it,” Ron muttered. “It’s not exactly a halcyon memory, if you recall.”

Ralph peered carefully across the firelight at Professor McGonagall. “Are you all right, Professor? We read about what happened to you in *the Quibbler*.”

McGonagall straightened and raised her chin. “Despite what you may have read, I am not intimidated by a gaggle of hired brutes. I held my own quite well, if I do say so myself.”

“They attacked her in her garden,” Revalvier spoke up disgustedly, glaring into the fire, her golden hair shadowed by a deep red hood. “Five of them set upon a defenceless woman.”

“Not exactly ‘defenceless’,” Debellows grinned mirthlessly. “She sent three of the five to St. Mungo’s with injuries far worse than her own. The other two fled back to their masters, no doubt with tall tales of being attacked by a she giant with ten arms.”

“Still,” Hermione said with a shake of her head. “The monstrosity of it. Poor Minerva spent weeks recovering from those curses. To attack a woman of her stature and experience...”

“If by that you mean a woman of my age,” McGonagall said stiffly, “You are quite right. One does not bounce back quite so easily after their eighth decade, but I daresay it looked worse than it was.”

Harry turned to his son. “The Professor told us everything as soon as she could. We know about the Durmstrang Professor, Avior, and his connection to that wizard you encountered in New Amsterdam. Everything you said checks out with what we already know. Something is going to happen at the Summit next week. We don’t know exactly what, but now, thanks to you and your friends,” he nodded toward Ralph and Scorpius, smiling thinly, “we know who will be responsible.”

“You’re welcome and all,” Scorpius said, still standing at the edge of the firelight, “but why didn’t you also summon Rose Weasley and James’ brother? They were in on all of this as well.”

“Oh, Rosie,” Hermione said to herself, both worried and angry. “Getting involved in all of this! That incorrigible girl!”

“Hush,” Ron said, stifling a grin. “She’s her parents’ daughter. What do you expect?”

“It’s simple, really,” Hagrid said, peering askance at Scorpius. “Rose and Albus aren’t in your Care of Magical Creatures lesson. I could’a gave ‘em detentions in their own lesson, jus’ like I gave you, could’a brought all yeh out here together, but that’d be right suspicious to anyone payin’ the slightest attention, wouldn’ it?”

Flitwick’s high voice rose over the crackle of the fire. “What we discuss tonight, we trust you to pass onto Ms. Weasley and young Mr. Potter however you can. We know you have means at your disposal.” He gave James a knowing smile.

Ron nodded. “But we have to make this quick. Grudje is gone at the moment, off on whatever errands keep him busy these days, but he could come back at any time. If he notices that Flitwick and Debellowes are both gone, he’ll get suspicious.”

“He needs very little excuse for that,” Revalvier commented.

James nodded fervently. “He’s a paranoid maniac. He’s completely banned any of us from talking to each other, even in our personal time. Filch is watching around the clock. And then there’s all those portraits of Snape!”

James realized by the blank looks on the faces of the adults that none of them knew about Snape’s pervasive collection of self-portraits. With a sigh, he decided that there was no point in keeping the potion master’s secret any longer. He explained how he, Zane and Ralph had discovered the disguised portraits scattered all over Hogwarts, and how Grudje had commissioned Snape to use them for covert purposes.

Flitwick was impressed despite himself. “*Dozens* of portraits you say! Are you quite certain?”

“At least,” Ralph nodded. “And not just in the halls and classrooms. He’s the monk in Professor Longbottom’s sitting room. He’s one of the painted knights in your office, Professor McGonagall.”

McGonagall rolled her eyes in weary exasperation. “He supposedly borrowed that painting to exorcise it of Boggarts! I told him I was perfectly capable of managing it myself, but he was insistent. Good grief, I thought I was shut of that man’s constant duplicity when he died. To think he’s been watching us all this time, reporting everything he sees.” Despite McGonagall’s stern demeanour, James could see that there was more disappointment than anger in her words.

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Hermione frowned. "He can't help it, can he? He's bound to help the current headmaster."

"He didn't offer such services to me when I was headmistress," McGonagall said archly.

Revalvier made a disgusted noise. "Perhaps Grudje was simply cunning enough to ask the right questions. Once he learned of Headmaster Snape's many portraits, he was bound to put them to use, and Snape was bound to oblige."

"It isn't quite that simple," Flitwick suggested. "Magical portraiture does not negate free will. Still, it *would* be difficult to resist. Especially if one finds that their orders coincide with their own subconscious instincts."

Harry nodded. "Professor Snape was never what anyone might call strictly ethical. And yet, I cannot help but think that even he would not contribute to Grudje's iron rule without knowing his true goals."

"Well," Scorpius admitted, "he did tell us the Room of Requirement was safe from Grudje's view."

"Did he?" Hermione brightened. "Well, that is something, then."

"Time's wasting," Debellows announced briskly, clapping his meaty hands and rubbing them together. "As good as it is to know how we've been observed-- and how to avoid it from this point onward!-- we have a disaster to avert."

"Quite right," McGonagall observed.

James looked up at his father. "But how? What's the plan?"

"That's why we summoned you here tonight," Harry answered, shifting his gaze from James to Ralph and Scorpius. "As much as I wish it were not the case-- and believe me, your mother will barely speak of it-- you lot are integral to our plan."

A second wave of relief flooded James where he sat. "I was worried we were on our own," he confessed. "And we're all totally out of ideas."

Harry nodded understandingly. "First thing's first, then. Can you tell us anything we don't already know? What's happened since you last spoke to Professor McGonagall on the Sylven Tower?"

James drew a deep breath, but it was Ralph who spoke first. "We learned about the Morrigan Web," he announced firmly. "Well, mostly.

There's a missing piece. We don't know how important it is, but here's what we do know."

He proceeded to describe their misadventure in the cellars beneath Alma Aleron. James and Scorpius helped, contributing details about the overheard conversation between Crone Laosa and Tabitha Corsica.

At the mention of Corsica's name, however, Harry interrupted. "You're certain that Tabitha Corsica was the one interviewing this Crone Laosa?"

"Absolutely," James nodded emphatically. "She cornered us afterward and dragged us all back to Hogwarts."

Harry studied his son's face seriously. "And then what happened?"

James shook his head. "Days went by. We knew she'd told on us. But then when Grudje called us all to his office it seemed like he didn't really know everything. He thought we'd snuck off to Alma Aleron to discuss night Quidditch."

"Well," Ralph clarified, "Scorpius here helped with that."

"And I'm not entirely positive that Grudje bought it," Scorpius admitted. "But he definitely didn't seem to know what we were really there for."

Harry nodded slowly. "All right, then. Go on."

James looked up at his father suspiciously. There was something he wasn't saying-- something about Tabitha Corsica. Scorpius, however, continued the story before James could ask.

When the three boys had completed their somewhat rambling tale, Revalvier finally spoke again.

"So we know two of the three markers to identify the Morrigan Web, if indeed that is the method that our enemies will use..."

"An assumption we are forced to make in the absence of any other theories," Debellows interjected.

Hermione agreed reluctantly. "It's too terrible to consider. All those innocent people!" She glanced at James, her eyes shining in the firelight. "You can't be there, James! None of you! Victoire, Louis, my Rosie...!"

"Hermione," Ron began, but James interrupted him.

"We have a plan for saving ourselves, and at least some of the others," he said as soothingly as he could. "We're hiding our wands

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during the tournament. If the Web works by unleashing some sort of super killing curse, not having our wands with us will keep us safe. We think.”

“Brilliant in its simplicity,” Debellows agreed, impressed.

“Well,” James shrugged, “We can’t take credit for that. It was Rose’s idea.”

“*That’s* my girl,” Ron sighed deeply, putting an arm around his wife’s shoulder.

“So, then,” Flitwick said, bringing the conversation back on point. “The Morrigan Web must be fuelled by something that once belonged to a very powerful dark witch or wizard, now dead. It will be a very personal item, I’d wager. Something that would have absorbed the subject’s strength and purpose over many years.”

Revalvier pushed back her hood and nodded. “And the second marker is proximity. It will be right in the centre of the gathering. A focal point.”

Debellows narrowed his eyes. “Since the event is a Quidditch match,” he suggested. “Perhaps the cursed object will be one of the game balls.”

“Possible,” Harry agreed. “Although Hogwarts Quidditch equipment does not often belong to only one person.”

Hagrid stroked his beard. “This is no common Quidditch match, yeh know,” he said. “Could be somebody will pull out some ancient traditional bit o’ equipment, all special like. A Quaffle from some famous old world cup or the like. We jus’ need ter keep watchin’ for anythin’ unusual.”

James’ eyes widened suddenly as an idea struck him. It was so obvious, so perfectly plain, that for a long moment he could not force his mouth say it.

“What is it, James,” his father asked, frowning aside at him. “You know something?”

James’ mind raced, outpacing his tongue. Finally, he looked at Ralph, his eyes still bulging in their sockets. “The Crystal Chalice!” he rasped.

Ralph’s eyes also widened as the realization struck him. Next to him, Scorpius finally sank to the grass, one hand rising to his forehead in amazement.

Ron glanced around the clearing in confusion. "What's the Crystal Chalice?"

"The new Quidditch tournament trophy," Flitwick said wonderingly. "Of course!"

Debellows smacked a fist into an open palm. "It's ancient. Likely belonged to some massively powerful old wizard king or queen, ruthless and tyrannical."

Hermione glanced at Harry, her eyes grave. "It'll be the centre of attention when they introduce it at the beginning of the match."

"Where did it come from?" Harry asked, turning to his son.

"Lance Vassar's parents," James answered spitefully. "They're explorers and teachers, spend all their time studying magical cultures and history and stuff. If they're anything like Lance, they're a pair of arrogant twits who think money and brains are the same thing."

"Be that as it may," McGonagall countered, shooting James a reproachful glance, "that doesn't make them enemies. This is a very serious accusation we are levelling against them."

"They need not even know of the plot," Revalvier suggested. "They may merely be willing dupes, unaware that the relic they've obliged to donate will be used for murderous purposes."

"Either way," Ron said, scanning the gathering for agreement, "this is the best lead we've got. Any disagreement?"

James looked around the fire, searching the circle of faces for dissent. When none appeared, McGonagall suggested, "Can we destroy the Chalice before the match?"

"Preferable but unlikely," Debellows sighed. "If it is indeed the source of the Web, it will be guarded extremely securely until the time of its use. We must be prepared to take it in the moments before it is triggered."

"To be safe," Flitwick said, his eyes flashing in the firelight, "I suggest we follow young Miss Weasley's counsel and attend the tournament wandless."

This was greeted with a circle of sober nods. Professor Debellows, James noticed, did not join in. The big man glared into the fire, his face stony, and James had an idea that it would be a cold day in hades before the old Harrier went anywhere without his wand.

"But we should keep them within reach," Harry said. "And let us hope that such precaution is unnecessary."

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Hermione gave a fervent murmur of agreement. To James' ear, it almost sounded like a half-prayer. He glanced up at his father. "Does this mean you'll be there, Dad?"

Harry nodded somberly. "Myself, your Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione, yes. Hagrid will help us sneak in. That will be no small feat, considering that Titus is in charge of security."

"What will he do if he catches you?"

At that, Harry offered James a true smile. "Remember who's head Auror, son," he narrowed his eyes. "Trust me. We won't get caught."

"What are *we* to do, then?" Scorpius asked, glancing up.

"You've done your bit," Debellows answered firmly. "From here on out, your job is to be careful. Stay out of Headmaster Grudje's way. Avoid Mr. Filch wherever you can."

"Pass your exams," Hermione offered with a half-hearted smile.

"And keep trying to get as many people as possible to go to the tournament wandless," Ron added seriously. "Just in case."

With that, the meeting seemed to break up. Professor McGonagall climbed to her feet with the assistance of Professor Revalvier. Debellows unsheathed his wand and snuffed the fire with a whispered command. "I shall wait for you to return first, professor," he said to Flitwick. "If you enter by the main courtyard, I will use the rotunda."

Flitwick nodded. Tugging his hat lower on his brow, he made off, tramping through the brush with surprisingly little noise.

"I'll escort yeh three back," Hagrid said, clapping James and Ralph on the shoulder. "Already got a nice collection of bursting mushrooms back at th' hut. Professor Heretofore will be right pleased with yer night's work."

"Good thinking, Hagrid," Hermione said, her voice still stitched with worry.

"Don' yeh fret now, Hermione," Hagrid soothed. "Everythin's gonna be jus' fine. Yeh wait and see."

Nearby, a pair of flat *cracks* struck the air. James recognized the sound of Professors McGonagall and Revalvier disappearing-- obviously Hagrid had walked them far enough to take them outside the protective boundary of the school, making apparation possible.

"Dad," James asked, "Where's Professor Longbottom? Why wasn't he here tonight?"

“Watching Professor Revalvier’s flat,” he replied, consulting his watch. “Minerva has been staying with her ever since the attack. As a result, we never leave the place deserted. Too easy for the wrong people to sneak in and lie in wait. Juliet will fill Neville in upon her return. Believe me, he is raring to get back to Hogwarts.”

James nodded. “I *bet* he is. And I wouldn’t want to be Filch when he does.”

“I wouldn’t want to be Filch even on his best day,” Scorpius said meaningfully.

“Hear, hear!” Ron agreed.

“Off with the four of you,” Hermione urged, pushing the boys toward Hagrid. “And be careful!”

“We will, Aunt Hermione,” James replied, reluctant to say goodbye but knowing it was time.

“And tell Rose I said hello!” she added, lowering her voice. “Tell her we’re sorry she couldn’t come out with you, but I was worried about her. Tell her her mum and dad love her!”

“Hermione,” Ron said, taking her by the shoulders. “Come. We have to get back.”

“I’m coming,” she snapped. James saw that his aunt was nearly trembling with worry. Uncle Ron seemed to realize this as well. His own face was pale in the darkness as he hugged his wife to him. He nodded at James.

“We’ll see you lot in a few days,” he said. “But if all goes well, you won’t see us. Stay out of trouble.”

“That’s a fine thing for you to say, Uncle Ron,” James said.

“He’s right,” Harry agreed soberly. “This is no time for heroics. Lay low. Get those wands stowed. And James...”

James sighed tiredly. “Yeah, Dad?”

“Good work,” his father said, stepping alongside Ron and Hermione and shifting his gaze to Ralph and Scorpius. “All of you. You’ve done more than any of us thought possible.” He frowned slightly. “I suppose, eventually, we’ll have to punish you for a good bit of it, especially if James’ mother has any say in the matter...”

Hermione laughed weakly. Ron smiled.

“But for now,” Harry concluded, “I’m proud of you.”

James nodded at his father, a surge of surprising happiness welling in his chest.

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A moment later, Harry, Ron and Hermione vanished in a trio of echoing *cracks*.

Hagrid sniffed. "Jus' like old times," he said, producing a hanky. He blew noisily. "Well, we best be gettin' back, then. Evenin' Professor." This last he addressed to Professor Debellows, who James only now realized was still standing across the clearing, blending preternaturally into the trees, awaiting his chance to return unnoticed.

"Good evening, Professor Hagrid," his deep voice rumbled. "Students."

By the shifting moonlight, James, Ralph and Scorpius collected their metal pails and began to follow Hagrid back through the Forest. As before, Trife bounded ahead, tracing back and forth through the bushes, growling at the tiny, gruff voices of the occasional wild garden gnomes.

As he walked, James thought back on the remarkable meeting he had just witnessed, filled in equal parts with burgeoning hope and deep dread. For the first time in months, he was teased with the possibility that everything might turn out all right after all. And yet, if it didn't, more than students and Muggle world leaders might die. His father would be there, along with his Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione. If the Morrigan Web went off, would they have their wands safely stowed? Or would they, like Kendrick Debellows, be willing to sacrifice themselves for the cause of constant readiness?

"What's a witch or wizard without a wand?" he muttered fearfully to himself, his voice lost in the clanking of the bucket at his side.

The Forest brooded all around, thick with shadows, but empty of answers.



The last days of the term trickled by with infuriating lethargy. As final exams gradually finished, the overall school mood lightened, looking forward to the final Quidditch tournament and the beginning of summer break with increasing boisterousness.

“Finally,” Deirdre Finnegan shook her head at breakfast on the day of the tournament. “We can get out of this prison. Unless Grudje finds some way to send rules home with us over break!”

“I wouldn’t put it past him to try!” Aloysius Arnst declared, his eyes bulging beneath his furrowed brow. “The more things seem to fall apart out in the world, the more he tries to fill in the gaps! If he could follow us all home he totally would.”

Devindar stabbed a piece of sausage fiercely with his fork. “Don’t give him any ideas. He’ll figure out a way.”

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” Heth Thomas said in a low voice, “but I’m thinking about skipping next year.”

Rose looked aghast. “But... you’re a *prefect!*”

“And you can’t just skip school,” Graham rolled his eyes. “There’s laws about that.”

“Bugger the law,” Heth said darkly. “And bugger being prefect, too. My dad grew up in Provence. My grandparents still live there. If I go live with them I can transfer to Beauxbatons.”

“*Now* you’re talking!” Graham announced, straightening in his seat. “Matter of fact, I’m coming to live with *you!*”

From further down the table, Lily set down her fork primly. “I don’t know what you lot are being so grumpy about. I think this year has been perfectly lovely.”

“Got Stockholm Syndrome, that one,” Deirdre muttered, cocking a thumb toward Lily. “Fallen in love with her tormenters.”

“I’m not in love with headmaster Grudje,” Lily bristled. “And I totally hate Filch. But still. *I* had a good year, mostly, and can’t wait to come back.”

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“That’s because *you* don’t know what it *used* to be like,” Graham sighed. “And you’re all googly-eyed about being an ‘emissary of the magical world’ at the Summit.”

Lily sniffed as she climbed from her bench. “I’m proud to represent us all, if that’s what you mean. And I’ll do my best to gloss over *certain* bad-tempered people who insist on only seeing the negative.”

“Yeah!” Chance Jackson agreed firmly, joining Lily. Together with Marcus Cobb and Stanton Ollivander, the group of first- and second-years threaded toward the double doors.

“Ah to be young and idealistic again,” Heth commented wistfully. “We were never that naïve, were we?”

Aloysius scoffed. “You spent your whole first year leading the common room in the Hogwarts tribute every night before bed.”

“Yeah, well things were different then, weren’t they? McGonagall was headmistress, Gryffindor had a winning Quidditch team...”

“Oh, don’t remind me!” Devindar interrupted, waving his hands in agitation. “I can’t stand it! Have you seen that new trophy! Lance’s parents and a pile of guards arrived with it last night! The thing’s three feet tall if it’s an inch, and glows like a rainbow in Antarctica!” He sighed sorrowfully. “It’s so bloody beautiful it makes me want to totally punch someone!”

Heth leaned away from his friend. “Save it for Vassar,” he suggested, nodding toward the head of the table. “He’s so full of himself about that new trophy that his head’s twice as big as normal. And that’s saying something.”

“He’ll be out there on the pitch presenting it alongside his parents,” Graham mourned, pushing away his half-eaten porridge.

James, who hadn’t been able to eat a thing for the giant knot of anxiety worming in his stomach, followed Graham’s annoyed gaze. At the head of the table, directly beneath the dais, Lance Vassar sat with his usual entourage of sixth- and seventh-years, all laughing breezily, as if they hadn’t a care in the world. Lance’s perfectly coiffed hair caught the sunbeams from the high rose window, forming a fine halo of pinkish morning light.

“I could bring myself to absolutely hate him if he wasn’t so ridiculously dreamy,” Willow Wisteria commented with an angry sigh.

Devindar could bear no more. He tossed his fork to the table with a clatter, stood up and stalked away.

A reverberating gong rang overhead, emanating from the monstrous clock. James glanced up at it and saw that all but the centre face had shut down. The Durmstrang, Beauxbatons, Alma Aleron and Yorke faces all pointed stiffly to noon. There would be few more trips through the vanishing cabinets now that the term was virtually over. James wondered if the clock would be gone next year. He fervently hoped it would. Of course, he reminded himself, there may not even *be* a next year. If his father, uncle, and aunt failed to stop the Morrigan Web...

But he couldn't think beyond that. It was too dreadful, and there was too much to do.

"Last exam of the term," Rose sighed briskly to no one in particular, getting to her feet. "Transfiguration with Professor Tofty. Shouldn't last long." She shot James a sidelong glance. "I'll see you all later this morning, then."

James gave a subtle nod. He knew what he had to do.

His first stop was the Gryffindor common room. Sunlight streamed from the high windows, suffusing the space with a golden haze and transforming the old sagging chairs and scarred tables into glowing tableaux. Unlike a typical mid-morning, the room was crowded with students, lounging and talking loudly or playing Winkles and Augers, biding their time until the tournament that evening.

Scorpius met James near the portrait hole, unslinging his book bag from his back.

"Got about half," he sighed, showing James the collection of wands hidden in his bag. "Everyone's too ruddy cheerful to think anything bad could happen."

"Half?" James repeated, dismayed. "That's all? We have to do better than that!"

"*You* try telling everyone that they're about to get killed at the Quidditch tournament," Scorpius whispered, challenging James with his eyes. "They think it's either a joke or you're mad. Soon enough one of them is going to run to Grudje with it. He already thinks you're one to spread stories for attention. He'll have us all locked up in the old dungeons."

James stared at the handful of wands in Scorpius' bag, fuming helplessly. "Fine," he shook his head. "Hand them over."

A minute later, accompanied by the skeletal sound of wands clinking in his bag, James made his way down the stairs to the Hufflepuff

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common room, marked by a large round door with an oversized copper handle. Julian Jackson was standing before the door, already wearing her Quidditch goggles and bobbing on the balls of her feet with impatience. A laundry sack, depressingly thin, was slung over her shoulder

“Here,” she said tersely, shoving the bag into James’ hands. “I don’t know what you’re on about, but my sister says you’re going to keep these safe for some reason.”

“Thanks,” James nodded, unslinging his book bag and stuffing the Hufflepuff wands into it.

“Don’t thank me,” Julian said. “I think you’re daft. And as soon as we win we’re going to want those back straightaway.”

James agreed to this and was quickly on his way again. Five minutes later, Herman Potsdam and Ashley Doone met him outside Ravenclaw tower.

“What’s all this about, James?” Ashley asked as Herman handed over an old hat stuffed with wands.

“I already told you,” James replied. “Something bad is going to happen, maybe. I can’t say more, except that if it does it’s going to be super dangerous to have a wand on you.”

Ashley narrowed her eyes. “It has to do with the Summit, doesn’t it?”

“Of course it does,” Herman said, rolling his eyes. “It’s the perfect target if somebody wanted to attack. Just like when that Muggle vice president got killed over the holiday.”

“James?” Ashley prodded, ignoring Herman. “What do you know about this?”

James shook his head. “If I say more, no one will believe me. Scorpius is right. Most people already think I make stuff up just to hog attention. Grudje especially.”

“I’m not one of those people,” Ashley said impatiently. “Gennifer Tellus is my big sister’s best friend and she says you’re honest, even if you were a lousy Gremlin.”

James frowned, taken aback. “Gennifer said I was a lousy Gremlin?”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “You’re no Marauder, James. That was your grandfather. You’re just a bit too responsible for your own good. Now Zane Walker...” She sighed and looked wistful.

“Good Beater,” Herman agreed. “Could have used him this year. A shame those Yanks got him. They don’t know beans about Quidditch.”

Ashley shook her head, coming back to the point. “You can tell me, James. I know you’re no liar.”

James felt grudgingly gratified by Ashley’s words. “Look,” he said, dropping his voice to a whisper. “There *is* an attack planned on the Summit. If it happens, lots of people are going to be killed. It won’t be wand-to-wand combat, either. More like a magical bomb. People are trying to stop it. But if they can’t...” He shook his head, unwilling to elaborate.

“Wait a minute,” Herman frowned, blinking. “*That’s* why we’re hiding our wands? I thought it was because Grudje was going to confiscate them?”

James rolled his eyes. “That’s just a rumour. But who knows? Maybe it’s even true. Either way, this is the best thing for all of us to do.”

“Oh,” Ashley countered, backing away. “My wand isn’t in there.”

James blinked at her. “What? Why not?”

“Like I said, James,” she replied soberly. “I trust you. If you say there’s going to be an attack, I’m inclined to think you’re right. And no way am I going into a fight without my wand, magical bomb or not.”

“But,” James protested, shaking his head, “But that’s the point! Your wand will be the thing that kills you!”

Ashley cocked her head. “I trust you, James,” she said thoughtfully, “But that doesn’t mean you’re always right. I’ll be keeping my wand handy. And who knows? Perhaps you’ll thank me later.”

“Maybe Ashley’s right,” Herman nodded, squinting into the old hat in James’ hands. Before James’ could stop him, the big boy stuffed his hand inside and retrieved a long, warped wand. “There she is. Sorry, James.”

James protested further, but Ashley and Herman seemed to have made up their minds. Together they ascended Ravenclaw tower, leaving James nearly sick with frustration below.

Albus and Ralph had even less encouraging news outside the Slytherin dungeons.

“There,” Albus said, dropping four wands into James’ bag. “That’s mine, Ralph’s, Trenton’s and Minch’s. She’s a first year and has a thing for ol’ Ralph here.”

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“Four wands?” James declared angrily. “That’s all?”

“Slytherins aren’t in the habit of handing their wands over to Gryffindors,” Ralph said, hushing James and steering him away from the dungeon door. “Besides, if your dad and his mates do their job, it won’t be a problem, right?”

“And what if they don’t?” James demanded.

“Come on, James,” Albus replied, “It’s dad we’re talking about! He and Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione are unstoppable! Didn’t you read Revalvier’s books?”

It was a joke, but James couldn’t share his brother’s confidence. A pall of deep dread was settling in his heart, turning his stomach into a bag of stones and filling his thoughts with nightmare visions. After all, it was more than the Collector they were facing. The Collector was just a mask worn by Avior Dorchascathan, and Avior himself was merely a twisted man, haunted and driven by a past that wasn’t even his own. The real threat was Judith and her Sister Fates, Petra and Izzy. James had no idea how they would play into the plot, except that, together, they represented a force of destiny that was exactly as powerful as it was unpredictable. And worst of all was the fact that, even now, virtually no one fully believed him, or understood the threat they faced.

Harry Potter, Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione may well be able to foil the Collector. But could they thwart the combined, chaotic might of Petra, Izzy and Judith?

As the three boys exited the Entrance Hall and darted into the brilliant morning sunlight with their clattering bag of wands, James warred with himself at every step.

Petra would not-- *could* not-- allow Judith to kill. That had been her primary motive on the Night of the Unveiling.

And yet Petra seemed to believe, *somehow*, that allowing the attack was the only way she could break the chain of destiny, to shatter the bonds that made her and Izzy Sister Fates with Judith.

And worst of all, what if she was right? What if the Morrigan Web was simply the price that had to be paid for an even greater salvation? What if it was necessary somehow?

For the greater good?

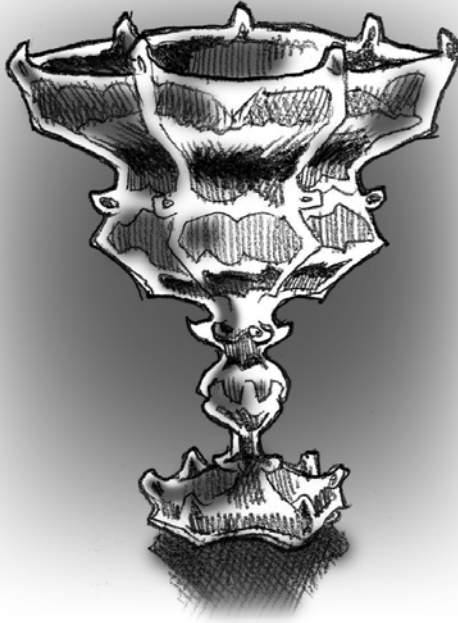
In the blazing morning sunlight, as the Quidditch pitch loomed ahead, its banners fluttering gaily in the soft breeze, a cold shudder wracked James’ shoulders. “No,” he muttered to himself, unheard as

Ralph and Albus ran ahead, aiming for the hidden trunk behind the Gryffindor grandstand. “No. There’s a better way... There has got to be.”

Even to his own ears, however, he sounded much more confident than he felt.



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21. THE THIRD MARKER

The final Quidditch match of the term was always a massively popular event, each grandstand filled raucously with students and teachers, peppering the air overhead with firework charms and bursts of confetti, all in various team colours. This year, however, the crowd was far thicker, packed to overflowing as students were crammed into the upper seats, leaving room in the lower boxes for Muggle dignitaries and their entourages, along with their wizarding counterparts and a liberal collection of ambassadors and translators from various international Ministries of Magic.

Even before James, Rose and Scorpius reached their seats, threading with difficulty through the milling, noisy throng, Rose was excitedly pointing out the foreign gatherings all around.

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“That’s the prime minister of India and his wife!” she exclaimed, hopping on her toes and pointing over Scorpius’ shoulder. “And over there with the Slytherins, look! That’s the German chancellor! And the French president sitting next to the French Minister of Magic and Madame Maxime!”

Sidling to a bench above Heth Thomas and Deirdre Finnegan, James asked, “How do you know all these people?”

“I read Lily’s ambassador instruction packet,” Rose admitted, settling into her seat. “It had a listing of all the attending government representatives. Extremely impressive, all of them being here today.”

“Muggles at a Quidditch match,” Scorpius shook his head. “What’s the world coming to?”

“Hush,” Rose scolded.

James glanced from grandstand to grandstand, watching the various Muggle leaders gaze from their seats with a wide-eyed mixture of wonder, anxiety, and undaunted curiosity. A collective gasp rippled around the pitch as the Hufflepuff and Slytherin teams emerged from the locker rooms far below, spiralling up into the air on their brooms and swooping around the grandstands like hummingbirds, their cloaks snapping behind them. The crowd of students raised a deafening cheer, joined somewhat more respectably by the government representatives and ambassadors. In the lowest box of the Hufflepuff grandstands, James spied the American president-- Drummond was his name-- clapping mildly amidst a knot of men in black suits and ties. His vice president was conspicuously absent, of course.

“Look!” Rose suddenly exclaimed, pointing. “Aunt Ginny!”

A thrill of sick shock descended upon James as he followed his cousin’s pointing finger. Sure enough, making her way to her seat above the Minister of Magic, was his mother, her red hair shimmering in the sunlight, her face drawn and pale.

“What’s she doing here?” he asked, both angry and dismayed.

“Her son’s playing in the match, if you hadn’t noticed,” Scorpius answered with a roll of his eyes.

“Not to mention,” Rose added proudly, “that she was a professional Quidditch player herself. That’s why she gets to sit in the VIP box along with the Minister of Magic.”

James shook his head. “I don’t care,” he said worriedly. “She shouldn’t be here.”

Rose leaned close and dropped her voice harshly. “She’s well aware of what’s happening here today, James. You can’t expect her to stay away with her family in danger.”

“That’s exactly why I wish she *had* stayed away,” James replied helplessly. As he watched, Lily, Chance Jackson and Marcus Cobb joined his mother in the VIP box, wide-eyed and pointing at the various important people all around. Ginny put her arm around Lily. When she looked up, James saw that she was looking across the pitch straight at him. She did not wave, but merely nodded at him tensely.

James sighed and nodded back.

On the pitch below, a hastily assembled band struck up a spirited rendition of the Hogwarts salute, led by Professor Flitwick on a tall wooden stool. Simultaneously, the new scoreboard erupted with showers of gold and green sparks. The competing house names glowed boldly in their colours, accompanied by a pair of matching, flashing zeroes.

“It really is quite a spectacle,” Rose admitted. “If only I could relax and enjoy it.”

“Everything’s under control,” Scorpius said with a curt nod. “There’s nothing for it but to watch.”

As the team players drifted back toward the pitch, dismounting their brooms for the ceremonial captain’s handshake, another wave of excitement arose from the spectators. James craned to watch as a pair of enormous figures lumbered into view, skirting the edge of the pitch far below.

“It’s Grawp!” Deirdre called happily, pointing. “And who’s that with him? She’s completely monstrous!”

“Prechka!” James answered, grinning despite himself.

Rose jumped excitedly in her seat, clutching James’ arm. “Look how they’re dressed!” she exclaimed. “They’re here as representatives of their clans! Prechka’s wearing the apron of the mountain dwellers and Grawp has on the crown of the cave tribe!”

Sure enough, Prechka, whose head bobbed along level with the lower boxes of the Ravenclaw grandstand, was wearing an extraordinarily lumpy smock fringed with rippling, swaying ribbons of dyed burlap. Grawp, shorter than his wife by nearly a dozen feet but still twice as tall as the equipment shed, wore a black iron crown so complicated and twisted that it might have been the nest of some kind of clockwork pterodactyl.

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The bulk of it seemed to weigh down his head, forcing him to hunch beneath it despite his wide, brick-toothed smile.

“The Vassars asked for them specifically,” James heard Willow Wisteria explaining. “They spent a load of time living with the giants, learning their language and customs. Mrs. Vassar especially thought it was important that as many magical communities as possible be represented.”

As James watched, a troupe of Aurors, led by Titus Hardcastle himself, trotted onto the field, surrounding the giants for inspection. Both Prechka and Grawp seemed to expect this. They waited awkwardly, apparently trying not to accidentally step on the Aurors.

Behind the giants, another shape trundled onto the pitch.

“What in the world is that thing?” Rose asked, squinting down at the field. “And is that Hagrid pushing it?”

James perked up at the mention of Hagrid’s name. Sure enough, emerging from behind the giants was a large cage on wooden wheels, pushed gamely by Hagrid. The cage seemed to be stuffed with puffy, squirming gold and green shapes. James recognized them as Pygmy Puffs, probably hundreds of them, all dyed the colours of the competing teams. The cage’s doors buckled slightly at the mass of the squirming creatures.

“Do you think...?” Rose whispered, nudging James with her elbow.

James merely shook his head, afraid to answer. He tried to imagine what it might be like to be his father, Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione hidden in the midst of that squirming, stifling mass of fur.

“Too obvious,” Scorpius muttered.

James watched breathlessly as Titus held up a hand, halting Hagrid in his trundling course past the giants. The Aurors approached the cage, abandoning Grawp and Prechka and producing their wands.

“Oh no,” Rose whispered, raising a hand to her mouth.

Hagrid moved around the cage, apparently warning the Aurors to keep their distance, but Titus nodded at the Auror next to him, Lucinda Lyon, apparently instructing her to inspect the packed creatures. She approached the cage, wand raised, and began to scan the interior with a faint purple beam. Hagrid watched this tensely, wringing his hands. When Lucinda reached the bulging doors at the rear of the cage, he tried to interrupt her again. She raised a hand to him warningly. At that moment, however, the strain of the Pygmy Puffs overcame the buckling

cage doors. They wrenched open, spilling the creatures forth like a freight of giant yellow and green cotton balls, momentarily burying Lucinda.

Titus leapt forward, flinging Pygmy Puffs in every direction, but he needn't have bothered. These creatures, as James could clearly now see, had apparently been bred just for the occasion. Tiny, fluffy wings unfurled from each of the Puffs, flapping in mad blurs and lifting them into the air. They bobbed like clumsy balloons, swirling up in a great, expanding cloud.

A roar of confused laughter and applause greeted the floating Pygmy Puffs, even as, down on the pitch, Hagrid and Titus pulled Lucinda to her feet.

"The cage," James said, confused. "It's empty..."

As the Pygmy Puffs drained from the cage, floating awkwardly into the afternoon air, they left nothing but blank wooden floor.

"Look at the giants!" Rose hissed.

Both Grawp and Prechka had taken their seats at the base of the Ravenclaw grandstand, plopping directly onto the grass at the edge of the pitch. Grawp's massive iron crown sat next to him, casting a complicated shadow up onto the door of the Ravenclaw locker room. As James watched, the shadow moved furtively. A pair of figures climbed out of the crown, ducking into the locker room door. Next to Grawp, Prechka's smock wriggled. One of its lumps became a third, slighter figure as it slipped lithely out of a pocket and disappeared behind the she-giant.

"Eww," James muttered in a hushed voice.

"Poor Mum," Rose whispered, recognizing the shape of Hermione Weasley as she crept into the shadow of the Ravenclaw locker room. "Being stuffed into a giantess' pocket is no way to travel..."

"Told you the cage was too obvious," Scorpius said smugly.

A mingled sense of deep relief and nervous anticipation filled James now that he knew his father, uncle and aunt had successfully snuck onto the pitch. The team locker rooms, he knew, were connected by short tunnels beneath the grandstands, giving the threesome access to the entire circumference of the pitch if necessary.

Down on the pitch, the Hufflepuff and Slytherin Quidditch teams were taking their positions on either side of the centre line. James saw Albus in his green tunic on the far edge, in the shadow of the Slytherin grandstand, his broom planted at his side. Cabe Ridcully stood between the teams in his official's tunic, a yellow cape fluttering from his

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broad shoulders. Gabriel Jackson, the Hufflepuff captain, joined him there, squaring her shoulders against Slytherin's Nolan Beetlebrick, who was easily twice as wide as her and well aware of it. She squinted up at him appraisingly, seemingly unimpressed.

"Welcome students, ladies and gentleman from the world over," Ashley Doone's voice echoed from the announcer's box, "to this very special and truly historic Hogwarts Quidditch tournament match!"

A roar of wild applause filled the air, along with an eager display of sparkling fireworks and waving banners. For half a minute, Ashley's amplified voice was drowned out by the crowd. James swept his gaze around the grandstands, taking in the sight of the gathered world leaders. Most smiled and applauded in a dignified manner. A few nodded and waved up at the crowd. The American president seemed to be in a close conversation with one of the Magical Integration Bureau agents who leaned toward him, speaking directly into his ear. In the VIP box, headmaster Grudje sat grimly next to the Minister of Magic, Loquacious Knapp, who stood as he applauded feverishly, his face red and serious. Behind him, James' mum sat stolidly, her face tense.

"In honour of today's momentous match," Ashley went on, her voice waking echoes all around the grandstands, "we are pleased to witness the generous gift of an all new Quidditch winner's cup, donated by intrepid explorers and proud Hogwarts parents, Draven and Lyddia Vassar!"

James looked down at the pitch in time to see the Vassars step out into the sunlight, blinking and waving proudly. Mr. Vassar was tall and handsome, with a prominent chin and black hair almost as perfectly coiffed as his son's. Lyddia Vassar was extremely thin, almost birdlike, with long blonde hair draped over her narrow shoulders. A pair of tortoiseshell glasses enlarged her green eyes as she waved up at the grandstands all around. Lance joined them as they strode onto the pitch, followed by professors Heretofore and Shert, who were levitating a large object between them, draped in heavy black cloth.

"There it is," Rose said, a note of dread coming into her voice. "The Crystal Chalice."

James nodded wordlessly. A wave of coldness came over him as he looked down at it. Even hidden beneath the thick black fabric, the Chalice seemed to emanate a silent pulse of power. How, he wondered, would his dad, aunt and uncle manage to abscond with it in the moments

before the Morrigan Web was triggered? He glanced around the pitch for any sign of them. Apart from the Vassars themselves, every eye in attendance was trained on the levitating object, eager to see it unveiled. Even the giants, Grawp and Prechka, were mesmerized where they sat, wide-eyed in the sunlight at the edge of the pitch.

“Wait a minute,” James whispered suddenly, leaning forward and squinting down at the giants. “Who’s that?”

Rose craned to follow his gaze. “What?”

“Somebody else is down there. Hiding behind Grawp and Prechka...”

Rose frowned and shook her head. “I don’t see--” she interrupted herself with a gasp as a figure flitted behind Prechka, angling into the shadow of the Ravenclaw grandstand.

“Corsica,” Scorpius said darkly. “What’s *she* up to?”

There was no mistaking that tall, lithe shape. Tabitha Corsica glanced back once, assuring that no one on the pitch had spied her, and then disappeared into the Ravenclaw locker area.

“She’s going after them!” James exclaimed. “Somehow she knows! She’s going after dad, Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione!”

Rose shook her head incredulously. “But, how *could* she know? Unless...!”

“Unless she’s part of Avior’s plan.” Scorpius suggested.

James was on his feet even before he knew it.

“Wait!” Rose exclaimed urgently, pitching her voice low.

“Don’t try to stop me,” James hissed, sidling clumsily along the bench, much to the irritation of Willow Wisteria and Mei Isis.

“I’m not trying to *stop* you,” Rose called angrily. “I’m coming *with* you!”

“Whatever you’re doing, hurry it up!” Devindar called. “Some of us want to watch the blooming match.”

James reached the stairs along the edge of the grandstand and was gratified to see both Rose and Scorpius clambering after him. Without waiting for them, he began to clump down the wooden steps, pushing through the trickle of students still making their way up.

“Calm down, Potter,” Scorpius said, grabbing James’ shoulder as they reached the first landing. “If we’re seen rushing down to the pitch during the opening ceremony it’ll attract all the wrong kinds of attention.”

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James knew Scorpius was right but could not restrain himself. He pounded down the wooden stairs, rounding landing after landing, even as Ashley Doone's voice boomed overhead.

"And now, to offer a short invocation before the unveiling of the new Quidditch winner's cup, Mrs. Lyddia Vassar!"

This was met with a much more tepid round of applause from the surrounding grandstands. James emerged at ground level just as it began to peter out. He stopped in the shadow of the Gryffindor grandstand, the enormous crimson lion banner flapping gently overhead, and took a moment to scan the pitch for any sign of Titus Hardcastle and his Aurors.

"There!" Rose said, pointing over his shoulder.

Sure enough, on the far side of the pitch, Titus stood alert beneath the Slytherin grandstand, his black eyes flicking ceaselessly over the crowd. Lucinda Lyon stood several feet to his left, wand in hand, pointed at the ground in a posture of professional vigilance. She was watching the pitch carefully, marking the movements of the teams and the gathering along the centre line. Professors Heretofore and Shert had lowered the fabric-draped Chalice to the ground, but remained on either side in preparation for the unveiling. From his own vantage point at ground level, James could just see Lyddia Vassar through the shoulders of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. The blonde woman raised her wand to her throat.

"Welcome, visiting dignitaries, and especially our Muggle brothers and sisters from the world over," she said comfortably, her voice echoing broadly up into the grandstands. "Let this be the first of many such occasions as we progress into a new era of cooperation and mutual friendship..."

The Quidditch players shuffled impatiently before Lyddia Vassar as she launched into a somewhat droning, albeit flowery speech, taking full advantage of her coveted moment in the spotlight.

"Come on," James muttered, ducking as casually as he could out of the shadows and crossing toward the Ravenclaw grandstand. Fortunately, a large number of students were still milling along the edge of the pitch, offering James, Rose and Scorpius a modicum of cover. When they reached the giants seated beneath the Ravenclaw banner, James was once again amazed at their sheer size. Even seated, Prechka looked like a vaguely person-shaped mountain draped with inexpertly sewn hunks of burlap. The coloured fringes of her smock fluttered in the breeze. All the

alertness had fallen from her face, however, as Lyddia Vassar's speech blared on. The she-giant glanced down at James as he crept next to her. Before she could speak, he shushed her with a finger to his lips. She looked quizzical for a moment, cocking her head curiously. Giants, James knew from experience, were not exactly the smartest creatures in the wizarding world. Thankfully, however, an expression of exaggerated comprehension washed slowly over Prechka's features. She nodded and pressed a trunk-sized finger to her own slab-like lips.

With that, James, Rose and Scorpius slipped into her shadow, angling toward the darkness of the Ravenclaw locker room doors. A moment later, they trotted along the short tunnel beneath the grandstand, casting around for any sign of Tabitha Corsica or the trio of adults that had preceded her.

"Drat, I wish I had my wand," Scorpius muttered as the shadows grew thick around them. The Ravenclaw locker area was unlit and empty, echoing with the dull thunder of footsteps high above, and beyond that, the unintelligible drone of Lyddia Vassar's speech.

"Which way could she have gone?" Rose whispered, casting left to right at the intersection which marked the tunnels to the other grandstands. On either side, stairs led down into lantern-lit passageways.

"We'll have to split up," James said reluctantly. "You two try the Gryffindor tunnel. If you see dad, Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione, warn them that Tabitha's prowling around for them. And if you find Tabitha..."

"Tackle her," Scorpius shrugged irritably. "Without wands, it's the best we can do."

James nodded. "She can't be allowed to interfere, no matter what."

"What about you?" Rose demanded, hopping nervously from foot to foot. "You'll be by yourself!"

"I do wish Ralph was along," James admitted. "But we don't have any choice. Go! They'll unveil the Chalice at any moment!"

Obviously unsatisfied but sensing there were no other options, Rose and Scorpius ducked into the left tunnel. James watched their shadows scuttle along the stone wall until they were gone. He gulped, turned toward the right tunnel, and realized just how ardently he wished he had his own wand with him, Morrigan Web or not. Stealing himself, he ran down the steps and into the tunnel.

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The passage curved slightly to the right, obstructing the view so that James felt sure he would encounter Tabitha at any second, her wand pointed at him and a triumphant grin on her face. He forced himself to run on regardless, eventually spying the stone steps and faint daylight of the Hufflepuff locker area. He scampered up and threw himself against the inside wall of the stairway, breathing hard and feeling horribly defenceless. Furtively, he glanced around the corner, first into the brightly lit but apparently empty Hufflepuff locker room, then along the short passage leading to the pitch.

Framed by the open doors, James could see the grassy pitch stretching away, crowded with the Hufflepuff and Slytherin players, their brooms held upright at their sides. Lyddia Vassar was facing away from him, her wand still raised to her throat, her voice still casting flat echoes up into the grandstands. At her heels, the Crystal Chalice still stood covered in black cloth, flanked by Professors Heretofore and Shert, their wands at the ready.

And crouched just inside the double doors, her own wand protruding from her fist, was Tabitha Corsica.

James' breath caught in his chest, amplifying the thunderous pounding of his heart. Corsica seemed to be watching the ceremony avidly, her gaze sweeping the pitch as if searching for something.

"And that is why," Lyddia Vassar's voice rang out, "we are proud to present this, our latest and perhaps most important discovery, the fabled Crystal Chalice of Timor Roon, the last king of the united wizarding world, nineteenth in line from the elder King Kreagle, and last to witness an age of Muggle and magical coexistence. Some say his was a rule of despotism and tyranny, but that is all the more reason that this, his most famous relic, should herald an age of mutual tolerance and respect..."

James crept forward as these words filled his ears, approaching Corsica as quickly and carefully as he could. She did not move, but continued to crouch just inside the open door, her wand brandished at the ready. James' breath grew stale in his chest but he refused to breathe, refused to make the slightest noise as he skulked closer... closer...

Somehow, even over the noise of Vassar's echoing speech, Corsica heard him. She turned, glancing back over her shoulder and spying James with one bright, dark eye.

James threw himself upon her, reaching for her wand. Amazingly, he grasped it and succeeded in wrenching it from her hand. She pivoted, throwing him from her shoulders into the corner between the tunnel wall and the doorway. James clambered around, however, and pointed Corsica's wand back at her, stopping her in her tracks.

"What are you doing, you complete idiot!" she demanded, her voice a hard rasp.

"I'm stopping you!" James replied, his own voice hushed desperately. "Now get back away from the door!"

"James," Corsica seethed, refusing to budge. "Give me back my wand. Now!"

James shook his head fervently, knowing that the Morrigan Web might be unleashed at any second. If it was, he would be killed. "Get back, Tabitha! I don't know what you're about, but this stops now! You're not going to interfere!"

"If I don't interfere, you perfect fool," she said urgently, "your father will go to Azkaban!"

James blinked at the tall witch, baffled and shocked by her words but refusing to lower her wand. He circled her, putting his back to the locker room. "How do you know my dad's here?"

"Because," she rolled her eyes impatiently. "He's *Harry Potter*. He's here to save the day, as I knew he would be. You told him your daft suspicions about the Morrigan Web and he and his friends were stupid enough to believe you. I was watching for them and witnessed them slipping beneath the Ravenclaw grandstand. I followed, meaning to find them before it's too late. My intention is to warn them that the day doesn't *need* to be saved."

"You're a liar," James exclaimed, renewing his grip on her wand. "You're in on it! You have to be!"

"If I was," Corsica answered immediately, taking a step toward James, "would I be hiding here with a wand in my hand?"

James shook his head in angry confusion. "You're crazy! Just like the night of the Triumvirate when you thought you were the bloodline of Voldemort! You couldn't possibly want to help my dad! You hate him!"

Corsica took another step toward James, forcing him to back further away. "Think back to when I first confronted you at Yorke," she demanded, speaking very quickly. "Do you recall when I told you that a certain mysterious benefactor had intervened on my behalf,

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recommending me for that post? Few members of the Wizengamot were inclined to listen to him, but he was very insistent, recommending-- and obtaining-- the dissolution of my probation in Australia.”

James was barely listening, his mind reeling. Beyond Corsica, Lyddia Vassar seemed to be concluding her speech. A smattering of applause began to build in the grandstands overhead.

“Stay back, Tabitha,” James insisted, the wand trembling in his hand. Despite this, she continued to close in on him,

“My mysterious benefactor,” she said, her eyes locked onto his, “was none other than Harry Potter. Your father risked his own reputation to recommend me, despite everything that had happened. *That’s* why I didn’t tell Headmaster Grudje enough to get you expelled, even though you surely deserved it. And that’s why I came here to watch for him, to prevent him from dashing out onto the pitch in the mistaken conviction that he is saving the world. All he will do is get himself and his friends arrested in the middle of the highest security event in wizarding history. He will go to prison, James, and be ruined for life. We have only seconds to prevent that.”

“But...” James stammered, his resolve weakening as he attempted to absorb Tabitha’s revelations. “But the Morrigan Web! It’s the Crystal Chalice! It has to be!”

“It is *not*,” Corsica declared urgently. “There are three markers for identifying the Morrigan Web.”

James nodded, still backing away from Corsica, her wand still raised in his fist. “I know! It has to belong to a powerful dead witch or wizard, and it has to be the centrepiece! It fits perfectly!”

“You missed the third requirement, James,” Corsica exclaimed, holding her hand out for her wand. “The third requirement is *time*! It takes months for the enchanted object to steep in its destined location, to build its power, to reach the proper culmination of strength. The Chalice only arrived last night! It couldn’t spawn a single magical spark, much less the Morrigan Web!”

“Time...” James repeated, stunned. Could Tabitha Corsica, his long-time nemesis, be telling the truth? Was the Crystal Chalice actually harmless, nothing more than a curious relic passed off as a sporting trophy? If it was, then his dad was indeed charging into capture and imprisonment at the hands of his own partner, Titus Hardcastle. He glared at Corsica, trapped in a hopeless, crippling web of indecision.

“How can I trust you?” he demanded, nearly shouting as the applause rose to deafening levels outside.

“Because I have nothing to gain by lying!” she yelled in answer, raising her own voice.

James’ heart was slamming against his ribs, his mind reeling. Finally, as the roar of the crowd reached its zenith, he threw down Corsica’s wand and pelted past her, aiming for the daylight of the pitch.

As he emerged, the crowd cheered seamlessly, filled with stamping feet and waving banners. James bolted onto the pitch, threading clumsily through the standing players, trying to look in all directions at once for any sign of his dad, uncle or aunt. He shoved past Albus, knocking aside his broom

In the centre of the pitch, Professors Heretofore and Shert were levitating the draped Crystal Chalice again, raising it high into the air. With an additional, practiced flick of her wand, Heretofore jerked the draping fabric from the Chalice, whipping it off with a sweeping flourish. Sunlight glinted prisms from the great crystal cup as it floated overhead, turning gently and casting refractions down onto the grass of the pitch.

“Dad! No!” James called, but it was a moment too late. A dark flying shape rocketed out of the shadow of the Slytherin grandstand, angling straight for the Crystal Chalice. Two more shapes joined it, erupting from the shadows around the pitch. James recognized the dark-robed shapes immediately-- his dad, uncle and aunt on brooms they had found stowed in the team locker rooms. They surrounded the floating Chalice, spinning in tightening spirals, their wands extended. Overwhelming Heretofore’s and Shert’s levitation spells, they captured the Chalice and carried it between them, shooting up into the deep blue sky.

Several shapes launched into the air after them-- Titus Hardcastle and his squad of Aurors, of course. They hurtled upwards, wands extended, red Stunning spells lancing into the sky.

“They’re stealing the Quidditch trophy!” Nolan Beetlebrick shouted, pointing. “Get them!”

“Wait!” Albus cried, understanding dawning on him, but his voice was drowned in a chorus of angry shouts.

Cabe Ridcully blew his whistle frantically as both the Slytherin and Hufflepuff teams sprung into the air, following the Aurors in pursuit of the still rising trio of apparent thieves.

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“*Dad!*” James called up, stumbling into the centre of the field. He could no longer make out the shapes of his father, uncle and aunt. They were lost in the swirling cloud of Aurors and Quidditch players trailing after them. “Dad! Stop! Don’t--!”

A flare of white light and a concussive blast filled the air high overhead, repelling the nearest pursuers, who tumbled back momentarily before righting themselves again.

“They destroyed it,” Cabe Ridcully declared wonderingly, his voice clearly heard in the momentary shocked silence that followed. “Why would anyone destroy the Quidditch trophy?”

“It took us twelve years to locate that Chalice,” Lyddia Vassar said, her voice dull with shock.

“Capture them!” Someone in the Hufflepuff grandstand called shrilly. “Don’t let them get away!”

It was the only encouragement the crowd needed. A massive, angry roar exploded overhead, followed by a forest of raised wands. Red bolts peppered the air, even as the Aurors circled in on their quarry, surrounding them high overhead. James craned his head to see, squinting helplessly, unable to make anything out from such a distance without his glasses. Dimly, he was aware of Scorpius and Rose joining him on the centre line.

“Did we win?” Rose asked breathlessly, shading her eyes with the flat of her hand as she stared straight up. “Did they destroy the Chalice before it could go off?”

“They totally lied about not using their wands,” Scorpius said, shaking his head.

James dropped his gaze. Above and across from him, his mother stood in the VIP box, both hands over her mouth, her eyes wide and tense as she craned up at the milling broom riders. In front of her, the Minister of Magic looked completely stunned and horrified. Headmaster Grudje, however, merely glared down at James, a wry twinkle in his grey eyes.

Suddenly Scorpius grabbed James’ shoulder and pointed to the side. “Look out! Here comes Corsica!”

Ignoring Scorpius, Tabitha Corsica joined the gathering in the middle of the pitch, peering mildly up at the gawking, swooping Quidditch players. In the centre, Titus Hardcastle and his Aurors lowered slowly, their wands trained on the three dark-clad figures.

“You know, James,” Corsica said, pocketing her wand. “This reminds me of your first year, when you tried to steal my broom.” She sighed lightly and shook her head. “You really *do* have a thing for ruining Quidditch tournaments, don’t you?”



Slightly over two hours later, James, Scorpius and Rose met Ralph and Albus at the edge of the pitch. The match had finally concluded with a Hufflepuff victory, much to Albus’ compounded disgust. Bedraggled and sweaty in his green tunic, he dragged his broom behind him, fuming blackly as the fivesome ducked beneath the Gryffindor banner, seeking the trunk hidden at the rear of the grandstand.

Wind whipped capriciously around them, snapping the banners high overhead and carrying grit into the air. A pall of clouds had pushed in over the course of the match, blotting out the sun and dropping the temperature by ten degrees, as if the weather itself was competing with the confused darkness of James’ own mood.

No one spoke of the fiasco which had preceded the match. The one small mercy to come from it was that Titus Hardcastle had allowed the three “thieves” to remain in their cloaks and hoods during the course of their arrest, thus preserving the secret of their identities. Lucinda Lyon had taken charge of security for the remainder of the match while Titus and a second Auror escorted the three figures back to the castle at wand-point, accompanied by resounding boos and jeers from the uniformly furious crowd.

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Mingled with the deep disappointment about the arrest of James', Albus' and Rose's parents was the strange and unexpected relief that, in spite of everything that had gone wrong, everyone had survived the Quidditch Summit. There had been no attack. James' dad, uncle and aunt had been willing to sacrifice themselves, triggering the Morrigan Web at a safe distance from the crowd gathered below. But the Chalice had not been the trigger after all. There was no Morrigan Web. In all the feverish worry and preparation for disaster, this was the one outcome that James had completely failed to consider-- that he had been, quite simply, wrong.

But Avior said he was going to attack the Summit, he reminded himself. Had the twisted old wizard simply been lying? Was he, perhaps, insane? Delusional? Surely that was a possibility, considering the cracked nature of his past, and yet...

As the five students rounded the corner of the grandstand, James was not exactly surprised to find a gaggle of waiting students, all looking terse and impatient. More seemed to be approaching from the exiting throng as the grandstands emptied, accompanied by a distantly echoing fanfare of Professor Flitwick's band.

"That was some 'attack!'" Fiona Fourcompass called accusingly, spying James. "It was nothing more than a stupid prank! Who were they, anyway?"

A chorus of angry shouts followed this as the crowd milled around James, Ralph and Rose, demanding both explanations and their wands back.

Hurriedly, Ralph dropped to one knee before a large, mossy boulder. Scrabbling behind it, he retrieved his own hidden wand, and then tapped the boulder with it. A shimmer of light transformed the boulder into an old Quidditch trunk, which Ralph then wrenched open. A pile of wands lay inside like pick-up sticks. The crowd collapsed upon the trunk, dozens of hands reaching for their wands. Suddenly, a horribly familiar voice called clearly over the noise, startling the crowd into silence and making James jump.

"Back away from the trunk, if you please," the voice commanded sternly, brooking no argument. As if to emphasize this, the trunk slammed shut of its own accord, nearly chopping off a number of reaching fingers.

James turned, a weight of deep dismay descending on him like lead. The crowd of students parted behind him, backing away to reveal the much taller figure of Headmaster Grudje, his wand held lazily in his thin fingers. He flicked it. In response, the trunk lifted into the air, soared down the aisle formed by the parted students, and plunked neatly at Grudje's feet.

"Mr. Potter," he said in a low, silky voice. "How did I know that you would be at the centre of this curious post-match gathering?"

James didn't answer. It wasn't that he was afraid. His cheeks burned with such a sudden surge of helpless anger that he feared that if he spoke at all he would shout in fury.

"Is anyone prepared to tell me what I might find in this trunk?" Grudje asked, addressing the crowd and raising his eyebrows inquisitively. A scattering of hands shot into the air.

"James and his mates told us there was going to be an attack!" a girl volunteered. James saw that it was Julie Minch, the Slytherin girl who apparently fancied Ralph. In the wake of Slytherin's tournament loss, however, all of her hopeful acquiescence had soured to petulant anger. "They said it was for our own safety to hide them away."

A rabble of voices agreed, while a Ravenclaw boy that James didn't know added, "They told us you were going to confiscate our wands!"

More voices roused in agreement, becoming agitated. Grudje stilled the crowd with a raised hand.

"And what," he asked mildly, "might you have to say for yourself, Mr. Potter?"

James pressed his lips together firmly. He could feel the heat on his face, turning his cheeks brick red with rage.

"Ms. Weasley?" Grudje inquired, flicking his eyes toward Rose. "Mr. Deedle? Mr. Malfoy? Anyone?"

"Would you really like the truth, sir?" Scorpius replied, giving the headmaster an appraising look.

"I would indeed," Grudje answered with cool magnanimity, spreading his hands slightly. "At least, whatever limited perception of the truth you and your persistently troublesome friends adhere to."

Scorpius cocked his head. "The truth, sir, is that no one trusts you. Even if we were wrong about what was meant to happen here today,

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the fact is that everyone here was willing to entrust their wands to us because they do not trust *you*-- either as their protector, *or* their leader.”

The dead silence that followed this statement spoke as loudly as a chorus of shouts. James glanced aside at Scorpius, not sure if he was more impressed or mortified with the blonde boy’s blunt candour. Scorpius merely glared up at the headmaster, his expression passive, almost bored.

“I would not be so quick to speak for those present here this evening,” Grudje commented, allowing his gaze to roam over the assembled students. “They may not ascribe to your limited perception of current school events. They may, in fact, be mere pawns in your plot of discord and sedition. And yet, they have found themselves rather easily duped by your lies.” Here, Grudje returned his gaze to James. “Mr. Potter, you invented the fiction that these unfortunate students were going to have their wands confiscated. Of course, I have harboured no such intention. In light of this situation, however, I find that perhaps yours is an idea worth some merit. If these students are so eager to hand their wands over to anyone with a fanciful tale, perhaps they should be taught the responsibility that comes with the privilege of wand possession.”

Grudje studied James for a long moment, his eyes glittering meanly. Then, he lowered his gaze and flicked his wand once more. A stream of thick chains sprayed from his wand tip. Clanking and rattling, they coiled around the trunk at Grudje’s feet, snapping tight and clamping shut with a large iron padlock.

“Until further notice,” the headmaster said, pocketing his wand, “and by order of me, your headmaster, these wands are indeed officially confiscated. You may have them returned to you before the end of term, if--” he held up a narrow finger, quelling the growing protests, “you present to me an essay of no less than twelve inches of parchment titled, ‘Why I Will Never Relinquish My Wand Again’.”

The crowd redoubled its protests, shrill and furious.

“On second thought,” Grudje amended, raising his chin and narrowing his cold eyes. “Perhaps *sixteen* inches would be more illuminating!” He glared around, challenging the students to continue their protests. Instead, the crowd fell silent, crackling with barely restrained fury.

“Much better,” Grudje said softly, turning away. “Do enjoy your evening students. I look forward to your remorseful thanks in the years to

come.” As he paced toward the castle, the chained trunk began to follow him, clunking along atop its own shadow. Wind whipped Grudje’s cloak and carried restless waves over the grass.

“*Sixteen inches!*” Graham Warton seethed, punching James in the shoulder. “One day before end of term and *sixteen inches* of essay! Thanks *loads*, you great *idiot!*”

“That’s the last time I ever listen to a Potter about *anything!*” Fiona declared loudly. This was greeted with a murmur of angry assent as the crowd began to trickle toward the castle.

“Well, there’s *one* good thing to come from all this,” Scorpius commented, clapping James on the back. “At least now you weren’t wrong about why we hid the wands.”

James could not bring himself to respond. He was so numb with rage and frustration that he couldn’t imagine ever feeling cheerful again. Silently, he began to follow the crowd as it drifted toward the castle, snatches of angry comments carrying back to him on the cooling wind.



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22. AN IMPOSSIBLE BARGAIN

Dinner in the Great Hall was a rushed affair, as a much grander dinner and conference for the worldwide delegates was planned for later that evening. House elves, rarely seen during mealtimes, were bustling about the hall in their Hogwarts napkins and tea-towels, hanging bunting, cleaning the high windows on tottering ladders, and replacing any of the floating candles that were more than a third burned. The four school vanishing cabinets had been removed, making the area along the front of the house tables seem strangely empty.

The most noticeable difference, however, was on the dais that ran below the rose window and the enormous five-faced clock. The teacher's tables and chairs were gone, replaced with dozens of brass easels, all arranged in a neat semi-circle, and each bearing a framed portrait. These, James recognized, were the headmaster portraits that normally adorned the wall of the headmaster's office. Each portrait seemed unusually alert,

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some with bright curiosity, others with haughty disdain, most chattering avidly amongst themselves.

In the centre of the dais, positioned directly below the clock and looking wildly incongruous, a reflecting pool had been erected, filled with rippling water and adorned with six golden statues. James recognized the arrangement, for he had seen it dozens of times on his visits to the Ministry of Magic. It was a replica of the Fountain of Magical Brethren, showing a handsome wizard and beautiful witch, along with an adoring centaur, goblin and house elf, all spouting cascades of glittering water, the witch and wizard from their wands, the others from various bodily extremities. Added to the collection, however, was the unmistakable figure of a Muggle man, most noticeable for his lack of an upraised wand. This sixth figure was positioned between the witch and wizard, his arms lifted, palms up, capturing the cascading water from the spouting wands, his face upturned in grateful rapture.

“Did you see Mum,” Albus asked, passing James on his way out of the Hall.

“Yeah, but only for a minute,” James acknowledged, turning back to the stew he was idly picking at with a fork. “She was in the Entrance Hall talking to Flitwick and Debellows. She and Debellows left straightaway, headed back to the Ministry to try to get dad, Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron released right away. Titus won’t even meet with her. Says he’s too busy. I think he’s just dodging her.”

Albus nodded dourly. “Any idea where he’s got them locked up?”

“No clue,” James admitted darkly. “Could be anywhere, and he’s keeping it a total secret. Doesn’t want anyone breaking them out while he’s busy with the big banquet tonight.”

Albus sighed angrily. He seemed to want to say more, but couldn’t think of anything. After a long moment of shuffling his feet and watching the house elves straighten the headmaster portraits, he continued on his way.

Glancing back up at the portraits, James could not help noticing that the portrait on the far end, the one showing the stern visage of Merlinus Ambrosius, was still as unmoving as stone. He was somewhat surprised that it had been included in the arrangement at all-- the paintings were obviously meant to inspire wonder and awe in the Muggle attendees. Perhaps the name alone would be enough. According to Zane,

Muggles were quite familiar with the legendary sorcerer, albeit through myth and legend.

The portrait of Albus Dumbledore, however, was nowhere to be seen. This was not particularly surprising, James supposed, since the last few times he had seen the painting it had appeared completely abandoned.

Despite the bustle of the room and the palpable air of anticipation, the atmosphere around the house tables was tainted with sullen anger. Even the Hufflepuffs, who under normal circumstances would have been celebrating their tournament victory, sat in a shroud of subdued gloominess. Not only had their trophy been stolen and destroyed by unknown vandals, the entire team had given James their wands-- and seen them subsequently confiscated-- at the behest of their captain, Gabriel Jackson. Even now, she glared at James from the Hufflepuff table, still wearing her Quidditch tunic, her hair pulled back in a frayed ponytail.

James ate as quickly as he could and left the Great Hall by himself, unable to bear the silent anger of his classmates any longer.

Unexpectedly, Nastasia joined him as he climbed the stairs to the common room.

"How'd *you* get in?" he grumped under his breath. "All the vanishing cabinets have been stowed somewhere. Probably shut down, too."

"Oh, they haven't been disenchanting yet," she answered, matching his footsteps up the swivelling staircase. "There are still a few students out and about, finishing up last minute assignments. Besides, I've been here all day. I wanted to see what happened."

"Must be nice to be able to turn into a snake and slither around unseen," James muttered.

"I told you," she said primly, "I don't turn into *a* snake. But yes. It's handy."

They reached the top of the stairs and angled toward the portrait of the Fat Lady.

James said, "So I suppose you saw everything."

Nastasia shrugged noncommittally. "I saw that things didn't go how you'd planned."

"*That's* an understatement," James barked a sardonic laugh. "My dad, aunt and uncle arrested, imprisoned somewhere in the castle until

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Titus can take them back to the Ministry... half the school's wands confiscated and everyone blaming me for it..."

"I wouldn't say *half* the school's wands," Nastasia commented. "You aren't *that* persuasive. More like a third."

"Thanks," James grouched. "You're a great help." He stopped in front of the portrait and spoke the password. The Fat Lady swung open with a faint creak.

"Are you going to invite me in?" Nastasia asked.

James looked back at her. "Why should I? I've got sixteen inches of essay to write."

"You aren't writing any essays tonight," Nastasia said with a knowing smile. "And I think you could use a friend."

James paused on the threshold of the common room. Nastasia was right on both counts. "Fine," he sighed. "Come on in. But I'm not going to be especially good company tonight."

"That's all right," Nastasia laid a hand on his shoulder and gave him an apologetic look. "You never are."

James rolled his eyes and ducked through the portrait hole. Nastasia followed.

If anything, the common room was even more moody than the Great Hall had been. Even those who did not have essays to write seemed strangely subdued, considering that the term was virtually over and summer holiday was upon them. Part of it was likely the weather. Darkness pressed against the windows, which rattled with sudden, whistling gusts of wind. The fire had been stoked against the strange chill outside. James spied Rose seated at her usual corner table, along with Deirdre Finnegan and Shivani Yadev, all bent dourly over parchments, quills in hand. Scorpius was nowhere in sight, likely still down in the Great Hall finishing dinner.

As James and Nastasia threaded toward the fire, Lily came skipping down the stairs of the girls' dormitory, resplendent in her dress robes, her red-blond hair neatly parted with a jewelled clip.

"I'm off!" she announced giddily. "We're going to sing for all the international leaders and the Minister of Magic and all the Aurors! Oh, I'm so nervous!"

"Well, you look simply wonderful," Nastasia assured her with uncharacteristic warmth. "If you sing half as nicely as you look, you'll knock their socks off."

Lily tittered at this, soaking up the compliment. James was in no mood for cheerfulness, even from his sister.

“Don’t you have an essay to write, too?” he said grumpily.

Lily cocked her head and drew something out of the pocket of her dress robes. It was her wand.

“Headmaster Grudje gave mine back,” she said sweetly, batting her eyes. “Me and all the other student ambassadors. Didn’t want us distracted from our duties, he said. Maybe he’s not so bad as everyone says.” She glanced at the clock over the fire and exclaimed, “Oh! I need to go! We’re all meeting in the entrance hall just before seven! Professor Heretofore will let us in all at once. In a procession, no less!” She grinned, beside herself with excitement. With a quick wave goodbye, she dashed toward the portrait hole.

“She doesn’t know, I assume,” Nastasia asked in a low voice.

“About dad?” James replied, “No. We kept her out of it. She has no idea who got arrested today.”

Nastasia nodded. “Good for her. I’m sure it will all be worked out before she ever needs to know.”

James wasn’t interested in Nastasia’s meaningless assurances. He threw himself into a sagging armchair before the fire while she settled onto the end of the sofa nearest him. Neither said anything further on the subject.

How, James mused to himself, glaring into the fire, *how* could he have been so totally wrong? It wasn’t just that Avior had admitted his plan to attack the Quidditch Summit. It was the arrangement of wizard chess pieces on his desk, seeming to signify some on-going conflict, each piece representing real people: himself, a knight; his father, the diamond king, and Rose inexplicably the queen. And on the other side of the board, ranged against them, Petra/Judith as the dark queen, the Collector as the king...

Could it possibly all have been a sham? The lunatic ravings of Avior’s broken mind? Wouldn’t Petra have told him? After all, when she had met him in the mysterious gazebo, she had warned him that he was getting too close, figuring too much out. If it was all just a madman’s delusion, wouldn’t she simply have said so?

James frowned at the fire, his mind spinning. It simply didn’t make any sense. There had to be something he was missing...

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He had been so sure that the Crystal Chalice would be the trigger for the Morrigan Web. It had made such perfect sense. But was it possible that that had been his biggest mistake?

“Like Hagrid’s cage,” he muttered to himself. “Scorpius said it was *too* obvious...”

“What?” Nastasia stirred next to him.

James shook his head, trying to clear it, to arrange his thoughts. “When dad and Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione snuck into the tournament,” he murmured, still frowning into the fire. “Rose and I thought they were hidden in Hagrid’s cage, buried in all those Pygmy Puffs...”

“Bluh,” Nastasia stuck out her tongue. “Sounds like a form of torture. Those things stink when they sit in the sun too long.”

“But Scorpius said it was too obvious,” James went on, ignoring her. “He knew it was a... a *diversion*...”

James sat up in the armchair, thinking furiously. Was it that simple? Had the Crystal Chalice purposely been included in the tournament as a decoy? A diversion, meant to flush out anyone who planned to stop the Morrigan Web? If so, it had worked perfectly. And after all, the Summit wasn’t over. Even now, world leaders and magical administrators were gathering in the Great Hall below, along with a collection of student ambassadors, teachers, and Aurors. Perhaps Avior had purposely misled James, allowing him to believe the attack would occur during the tournament in order to distract him from his *real* plan...

“But what could it be, then?” he asked himself. “I’ve got to *think!*”

“What are you talking about?” Nastasia asked, raising one eyebrow at him. “You’re not still on about the Morrigan Web, are you? Give it a rest already.”

Something that once belonged to a powerful witch or wizard, now dead, James’ mind raced, trying to find something that fit. Something that’s a centrepiece, that everyone would notice...

Could it be the new fountain and statues on the dais? No. They were too recent. Because according to Tabitha Corsica the third marker was *time*. The object needed to have been there for months, right out in the open, seen by everyone...

Time...

James' mouth dropped open with sudden realization. He nearly leapt out of his chair.

"What?!" Nastasia demanded, taken aback.

"It has to be it...!" James muttered tensely, his eyes bulging at the fire. "Oh no! Lily!"

With that, he did leap from his chair, turning to dash for the portrait hole.

"Wait!" Nastasia exclaimed, grabbing him by the elbow. "It's too late, whatever you're talking about. Look." She pointed at the clock over the fireplace. "It's a quarter after seven. Lily and her procession of little ambassadors marched into the Great Hall fifteen minutes ago. Ten Jacks says the doors were locked after them, and probably guarded by a couple of those wand-happy Aurors of yours."

James stared at the clock in mute frustration. "We have to get in there somehow!"

"What's going on?" a voice whispered at his shoulder.

James glanced aside to see Rose standing next to him, her essay forgotten on the table behind her.

"It wasn't the Crystal Chalice," he rasped at her. "But I know what it is! We have to get down there right away to stop it!"

Rose's frown deepened with confusion. "What are you talking about? Down where?"

"The big formal dinner in the Great Hall!" he explained, nearly bursting with impatience. "The Morrigan Web was never meant to go off at the Quidditch match! That was just a trick to throw us off track, and it totally worked! It's meant to go off tonight, downstairs, and I know what's going to trigger it!"

"You were pretty sure last time, too," Nastasia commented mildly.

"Shut up, Nastasia," Rose said. To James, she whispered, "No matter how sure you are, we can't just sneak into the Great Hall. It's got guards all around it. Every door will be locked."

"I know!" James exclaimed, trying desperately to keep his voice low. Even so, he felt the uncomfortable stares of several people nearby. "We need some help! Hagrid, maybe! Or..."

"Your parents?" Nastasia suggested.

Both Rose and James turned to her. James narrowed his eyes. "You know where they are?"

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“I do,” Nastasia answered with a nod. “I followed that Auror guy, Titus, when he brought them back to the castle. It was either that or watch the Quidditch match, and I have to admit I’ve never really understood that crazy game.”

Rose looked confused. “You *followed* Titus? And he didn’t see you? How...?”

“She has ways,” James answered with a roll of his eyes. “Trust me.”

“Fine,” Rose said, dismissing the topic for the time being. “Where are our parents, then? And do you think we can break them out?”

“I’ll show you,” Nastasia answered, turning to lead James and Rose toward the portrait hole. “As far as breaking them out, it’s doubtful. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t worth a shot.”



As the three students exited the portrait hole, James was pleased to see Ralph approaching from the opposite direction.

“Hi,” he said dourly. “No fun in the Slytherin common room tonight since we lost the match, and Julie Minch is on the lookout for me, says I owe her an essay. I was wondering if maybe I could hang out here...?”

“Walk with us, Ralph,” James said, grabbing his friend by the elbow and turning him around. “Stuff’s up.”

“Not again,” Ralph moaned, following along reluctantly. “What is it now?”

“James has figured something out, apparently,” Rose whispered, turning to trail Nastasia down a side corridor.

“Hurry, Nastasia,” James hissed. “We don’t have much time!”

"Where are we going, then?" Ralph asked nervously. "Because I just came to hang out, maybe play some wizard chess, try not to get cornered by that mad Julie Minch..."

"Take it easy, Ralph," Rose answered. "We're just off to break out our parents."

"Ah," Ralph nodded weakly, apparently unsurprised. "And we're doing this because...?"

"Because the Morrigan Web is still going to go off," James replied in a low voice. "And we need help stopping it."

"But we've been through this," Ralph protested, his face flitting in and out of shadow as they hurried on. "The Crystal Chalice was supposed to be the trigger. Except it wasn't..."

"It was never the trigger," James said with dark certainty. "The trigger's been in front of us all along. We didn't see it because we'd gotten too used to it."

Nastasia turned, leading the others down a curving stone stairway. "So?" she said, her voice shuddering as she tramped down the steps. "Do tell! What is it, then?"

James paused as they reached the bottom of the steps, gathering in the high corridor that led to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. "It's that bloody *clock*," he declared fiercely, meeting Rose's and Ralph's eyes in turn. "The clock that's been hanging in the Great Hall all year, plain as day!"

Rose's eyes widened as she considered this. "But... we don't know who it belonged to, do we?"

James shook his head. "Who knows? Could be anyone. Or maybe the trigger is hidden inside it, even. It's big enough. And it's been the centrepiece of the entire school for the whole year. Everyone's been watching it, running their entire day by it."

"Just a little further," Nastasia urged, striding forward again. James, Ralph and Rose followed.

"How can you be so sure it's the clock?" Ralph frowned. "We were certain it was the Chalice, after all, and that turned out totally pear-shaped..."

"I know the third marker for the Morrigan Web," James proclaimed. "Tabitha told me!"

"She did?" Ralph's eyes widened. "When?"

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James waved a hand impatiently. “Long story. Point is, the clock fits all three markers. The first one is ownership. We don’t know where it came from, but for all we know it belonged to some horrible witch or wizard...”

Rose nodded, quickening her stride. “The second marker is proximity. The clock is definitely the centrepiece of the Great Hall, right in the middle of all the action.”

“And the third marker is time,” Nastasia concluded. “It’s been there all year, steeping in both attention and its own magic, just waiting for tonight...”

She stopped in front of the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom door and put her hand on the handle. Two paces behind her, however, James came to an abrupt halt. He stared at her in the dimness, his face filled with sudden suspicion.

“I never told you,” he said slowly, “what the third marker was.”

Silence filled the corridor as every eye turned toward Nastasia. She gazed back at James unwaveringly.

“It’ll all make sense in a minute,” she told him. With that, she pulled open the classroom door.

James glanced inside. Four chunky shapes stood in shadow-- the four school vanishing cabinets, removed from the Great Hall and apparently awaiting disenchantment. Standing in the middle of them, also apparently waiting, was a tall, hooded figure, its face lost in shadow.

“Ah,” the figure’s deep, grinning voice said. “Ms. Hendricks and friends. Do come in.”

Rose gasped sharply; it was the Collector.

James recoiled from the door, pulling his cousin with him. Before he could retreat, however, something sharp poked him in the back, stopping him in his tracks. He spun around to find Nastasia behind him, her wand raised meaningfully in her hand.

“Go on inside,” she sighed impatiently. “Don’t keep him waiting.”

James’ stomach dropped in shock and disappointment. “You have *got* to be kidding!”

“You’re the one who must be kidding,” Nastasia shook her head. “After everything that’s happened, you trusted me *again*?”

“Believe me, I won’t make *that* mistake anymore,” James seethed, glancing down at her wand.

“Promises, promises,” Nastasia muttered. “Go on. Get moving.”
“He’ll kill us,” Rose protested breathlessly. “You know that, right?”

“Maybe,” Nastasia answered. “But that’s up to James, not me.”

“Ms. Hendricks is quite correct,” the Collector called breezily. “If she has brought you here, it means that you have learned more than I can allow you to freely know. But do join us. This night need not end badly for any of us. And please have your hands in sight. Wands or not, I’ve learned to keep a sharp eye on you lot.” He seemed to be amused by this.

Reluctantly, James turned back toward the classroom door. Ralph led the way slowly inside, followed by Rose and James. Nastasia remained behind them, her wand still raised threateningly. Once inside, she closed the classroom door with a dull clunk, and locked it.

“And now,” the Collector said in a low, eager voice, “Do make yourselves comfortable. We have tales to tell, games to play, and *time*, as I need not remind you...” he smiled broadly, knowingly, “is ticking... ticking... *ticking...*!”



James, Ralph and Rose hung back from the Collector, forming a loose line along the edge of the classroom, next to an untidy jumble of desks that had been pushed aside to make room for the vanishing cabinets.

“Please, my friends,” the Collector said, grinning from beneath his hood, “there is no need to be so formal. You have nothing to fear from me. I, like you, am without my wand this night. Discretion is the better part of valour, as the Muggle bard says, and considering what is about to take place, not having a wand in hand is most assuredly the better part of discretion.”

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“You seem very happy to let *her* carry a wand,” James spat, jerking his head toward Nastasia. “Seems like the better part of cowardly, if you ask me.”

“Ms. Hendricks will be well on her way before the Web is unleashed,” the dark man replied dismissively. “I would never place her in the slightest danger. She has been far too valuable to me, and shall continue to be, I am quite certain. But alas,” the Collector cocked his head at James. “You are unaware of your American friend’s rich history! Allow me to illuminate you.”

In a stiff voice, Rose spoke up, “I don’t think we care.”

“Oh, don’t let’s be petulant, my dear Ms. Weasley,” the Collector waved a hand as if to dispel a nasty odour. “I daresay that you, especially, might find this most intriguing. You are the intelligent one, after all. Cast your mind back to our previous meeting at Durmstrang, my dear. You may recall my mentioning that Ms. Hendricks has a very rich family history. In fact, it is more than rich; it is downright infamous. Go ahead, my dear,” he addressed Nastasia, who still stood behind James, her wand pointed at his back, “tell them the name of your great grandfather. Let us see if they recognize it.”

James glanced back at Nastasia, curious despite himself. He half expected Nastasia to be ashamed, or reluctant. Instead, she raised herself to her full height and lifted her chin.

“Hannibal Drake Magnussen,” she proclaimed proudly.

Next to James, Ralph gave a physical jolt. Rose clapped a hand over her mouth in surprise.

“Ah-ha,” the Collector grinned. “They do indeed recognize the name! Yes, your close friend and comrade, Ms. Nastasia Hendricks, is the descendent of one Professor Ignatius Magnussen of the American wizarding school of Alma Aleron. It was he who unlocked the mysteries of the wizard’s grand unification theory, who broke the threshold of the Nexus Curtain and tread the World Between the Worlds. Truly a man after my own heart. It is his blood and passion that flow through Ms. Hendricks’ veins. Thus it was no surprise that destiny brought back to her what was rightfully his-- the head of Professor Magnussen’s magical cane, lost for decades, passed from hand to unworthy hand. Ms. Hendricks recognized its potential, of course, and thus it was also destiny that she should present it to me, at the very time that I needed such a relic...”

James' mouth fell open. The cane! He had last seen it in the dream vision, where it had been sold to a Muggle pawn shop. From there, somehow, it had found its way through the decades back into the hands of its owner's youngest living relative. And that relative, amazingly, was Nastasia. He turned back to her, a rush of cold hopelessness filling his chest, remembering the night he had first met her...

"It was you," he said sadly. "On first night. You snuck through the cabinet to hide Magnussen's cane in the clock. That's what you'd been carrying in the velvet bag I found..."

Nastasia didn't answer. Instead, she lowered her gaze stubbornly, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Ms. Hendricks could simply have given me the relic," the Collector acknowledged with a sort of perverse pride. "I could have placed it in the clock myself. But she insisted on a more *active* role. Rarely have I encountered someone so young and yet so driven by conviction. She impresses me, I confess."

James glared at Nastasia, anger welling up to match the deep sense of betrayal. She lifted her gaze again, challenging him with it.

"Don't look at me like that," she said coldly. "You don't know me."

"I'm beginning to think you're right," James agreed. "What about Zane? Did you lie to him, too?"

Nastasia laughed. It was a hollow, mad sound. "Zane Walker is a dear boy but his brain turns off in the presence of girls. He was simply the easiest way for me to get to you. That's all he *ever* was to me."

James studied Nastasia's face critically. She was *lying*. He was certain of it.

"Ashya?" he asked quietly. "That's you, isn't it? You can't keep this up... can you?"

"Shut your mouth, James," Nastasia said, snapping her wand up to his face. "Or I'll close it for you."

"My, my," the Collector chided, "such youthful hot-headedness! Quite unbecoming."

"Hold on a moment," Rose suddenly said, as if giving voice to a question she'd been mulling for the last few minutes. "You say you could have put Magnussen's cane into the clock yourself? How, exactly? You've been dividing your time between New Amsterdam as the Collector and

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Durmstrang as Professor Avior. How could you have found the time, much less the means, to get into Hogwarts and do these filthy deeds?”

The dark figure seemed delighted by this question. He laughed out loud. “Ms. Weasley, your wit is a force to be reckoned with. Allow me to challenge it. How do *you* suppose that I accomplished these remarkable feats? How is it, do you think, that I am able to be here even now?”

James knew that Rose couldn't possibly know the answer to the Collector's question. When he glanced at her, however, her face was pinched with unspoken suspicion. “I only know that if you've mastered the secrets of the Morrigan Web,” she said carefully, “then you know that its original purpose was to share magic with the magically weak. And with squibs.”

“Like your Mr. Filch!” the Collector exclaimed conspiratorially. “Yes! Perhaps you have divined more than you have let on! But allow me to explain for those who might be a bit slower than yourself...”

Here, the Collector took a step backward, flinging both arms out so that his heavy sleeves flapped. His hands were very white in the dimness.

“It may interest you to know,” he said, pushing back his hood to reveal his dark hair and angular, grinning face, “that this persona-- the persona that I rather whimsically refer to as ‘the Collector’-- is quite a recent invention, created for use in the United States. The Collector is a useful face that I wear, meant to inspire both terror and trust, depending on how I use it. But it is a *new* face, a temporary one, a mere mask that I will discard soon enough. I do have *another* face, however...”

Here, the dark figure began to change. James had seen it happen before, in Avior's chamber, when he had changed from that persona to the one that stood before them now. He expected that same change to occur now, only in reverse. The figure did indeed grow thinner and older. This time, however, the hair turned iron-grey, matted like straw. The beard that sprang from the chin was stiff, triangular, threaded with black. And the face... the face that formed was not that of the long departed Albus Dumbledore. It was stern, cold, with deeply sunken cheeks and dark shadows haunting the eyes.

“This face...” the figure announced in its new, gravelly voice, “is the face of Rechter Strangeways Grudje. And I have been him for *decades*...”

Rose pressed back against James, scrabbling for his hand. She had obviously suspected this, somehow, and yet the reality of it was clearly terrifying. On James' other side, Ralph gulped, backing away half a step himself.

"As you can imagine," Grudje said, his entire demeanour changed along with his appearance, "it takes a wizard of unique constitution and particularly stoic mind to maintain three separate personas. The animagus aspect of it is only the beginning. The compartmentalizing of minds, the discipline of conflicting personalities, is the true challenge. None of you three can begin to appreciate it, of course," Grudje passed his gaze over Rose, James and Ralph, "but Ms. Hendricks... I suspect she has some idea of what I've mastered. The only difference between her and me is that I embrace the fracture, and cultivate it. In time, however, I intend to teach her that skill as well. She already shows the aptitude."

Ralph cleared his throat cautiously. "Headmaster," he said, addressing Grudje directly, his voice shaking slightly, "Sir, I think that you should let us go. We have... er... essays to write."

"Oh no, Mr. Deedle," Grudje replied. "We have only just begun. There is still more story to tell. Ms. Weasley is curious, after all. And Mr. Potter here... well, we shall come to him in a moment." He turned and ran a thin hand along the doors of the Durmstrang cabinet. "Before I, Rechter Grudje, was headmaster of this school, I was employed by the Ministry of Magic. Ms. Weasley has surely already ascertained this. I was an Unspeakable, consigned to the Department of Mysteries. This was by my design, for it gave me access to the deepest and most terrible secrets of the wizarding world..."

Grudje walked on, passing in front of the Alma Aleron cabinet. "It is said that, apart from its creator, only two people knew the tale of the Morrigan Web-- how it came to be, and how it was accomplished. These two were the international wizarding investigators who interviewed Professor Laosa after her first, tragic experiment. It is further said that the accounts of these investigators were lost to history, deliberately buried in the endless annals of the Department of Mysteries. I can tell you that this is indeed the case. For I alone found their tales. I absorbed them. It was my single goal as an Unspeakable. Using what I learned, I perfected Professor Laosa's technique. By my hand, transference of magic became a reality! Mr. Filch's cane is the result. With that object, Principia Laosa's original dreams are finally realized. But the clock in the Great Hall,

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bearing the relic of Ignatius Magnussen, is also the result. With *that* object, Principia Laosa's darkest nightmares are soon come to life."

"But why?" James asked, anger and frustration turning the question into a demand.

"But I have already answered that question, James," Grudje said, and as he did his face changed again. He transformed into Professor Avior, altering his bones and flesh with swift precision. "It is because destiny demands it. The rightful place of wizardkind is to rule. The Muggle world needs us. Left to their own devices they are unruly, unpredictable, a danger to themselves and others. We must subdue them. For their own good."

Rose gave a disgusted laugh. "You're going to rule them by killing them?"

"Some, yes," Avior replied, his voice deepening as he morphed back into the Collector. "But only those who must be put down to make way for us. Only those whose cooperation cannot be obtained by other means. It is a cruel mercy, but a mercy nonetheless."

"But my sister is there!" James cried out, growing desperate. "She'll die as well!"

"Oh, I'm afraid the reality is much worse than that, dear James," The Collector said, shaking his head sadly. "You see, your parents are also there."

Rose startled violently and emitted a little "eep!" of horrified surprise. James' mouth dropped open.

Ralph stepped forward. "What do you mean? Mr. Potter and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley are imprisoned somewhere in the school. They aren't in the Great Hall."

"Well, no," the Collector replied, hedging slightly. "You do have me there. They are in the antechamber directly behind the Great Hall. Unconscious, I might add. If things should go especially badly, do take some solace in that. They will not have suffered the suspense of their own impending death. Unlike this afternoon, when they willingly embraced what they believed to be their own doom, sacrificing themselves for the ungrateful crowd below. I suspect, were they conscious now, they'd feel somewhat silly about that. Pity we cannot all enjoy a hearty laugh over the affair..."

"What do you *want*?" James demanded furiously.

The Collector sighed dramatically. As he did, he transformed yet again, shifting back to the shape of Avior Dorchascathan with a subtle crackle of bone and tendon. "This is also a question I have already answered, James," he said. "In my office, weeks ago. History repeats itself, only this time we must get the details right. Like your father and Albus Dumbledore, you must join me rather than oppose me. We must be partners, you and I, and by your own willing decision. If you do so, I shall see that your sister and parents are moved to safety. It's all quite simple, really."

James shook his head helplessly. "That's crazy! How am I supposed to join you? How could I?"

"We shall come to that," Avior smiled thinly. "For now, simply answer the question: do you mean to partner with me? Will you, James, join me, as your father joined Albus Dumbledore?"

"Fine!" James exclaimed. "Anything! Just get my sister and our parents away from the Great Hall!"

"In a moment, in a moment," Avior nodded. "But first, I'm afraid, the details of our partnership..." He drew a deep sigh and regarded James speculatively. "You are not my first partner, James. I have another, a fetching yet powerful woman. It was she that introduced Ms. Hendricks to me, who recognized the potential of our alliance. You know this partner of whom I speak, do you not, James?"

James' mind was such a blur of fear and worry that for a long moment he had no idea what Avior was talking about. Then, with a shock, the truth clicked into place. "You mean..." he said, not quite daring to say it aloud-- would Avior laugh at him? Mock him? Doubt him as had so many others? He steeled himself and went on, "Your other partner... is Judith. The Lady of the Lake."

Avior nodded slowly, meaningfully. "I am jealous of you, James," he said, almost playfully. "You've known her rather longer than I. You two have a history. Don't attempt to deny it."

Rose turned to James as Avior spoke, her eyes wide, but not exactly shocked. He knew what she was thinking: she could no longer afford the luxury-- the comfort-- of doubt. The Lady of the Lake was real. Avior knew her. She was his partner.

Ralph sidled closer to James. "Blimey," he said under his breath, "you were right."

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Avior went on. "It is the history that you and she share that I mean to speak of, James," he said, a bit too casually to hide the intensity of his interest. "For it shall form the foundation of the partnership between you and I." As Avior spoke, he changed again, more gradually this time, transforming back into Rechter Grudje. He turned, pacing slowly along the line of vanishing cabinets. "There is something that I want, Mr. Potter. Something you have heard of, no doubt. It is a great tool. Even greater than the Morrigan Web itself. I have come to understand that whoever possesses it possesses the very fabric of destiny. With it, they can step outside the capricious and nonsensical restrictions of fate. Rather, they can make fate their slave, bending it to their every whim. You know the tool of which I speak, James. My other partner, Judith, whom you call the Lady of the Lake, assures me of this. In fact, she tells me that you are, quite simply, the key to it. You, my young friend," Grudje said, turning to face James squarely, piercing him with his cold, grey eyes, "You... are the key to the Crimson Thread."

James returned Grudje's stare, his mouth suddenly as dry as cotton, completely dumbfounded.

"And thus," Grudje went on, approaching James slowly, measuring him, "I present to you the nature of our partnership. I desire the Crimson Thread. I have already told you that it is nearly in our grasp. I am assured that you are the key to it. It is in your very hand. All you must do to save the lives of your sister and parents... is give it to me."

James could not speak. More than anything, he wanted to save his sister, his dad, his uncle Ron and aunt Hermione... but he had no idea what the crazily transforming figure was talking about. Why would he think that James was the key to the Crimson Thread? Why would he say that it was in his, James', hand? Helplessly, James glanced down, opening his hands. They were empty, of course.

"She lied to you," he said faintly, not looking up from his open hands.

"Speak up, Mr. Potter," Grudje said warningly. "And take care: the lives of your family depend on your next words."

James shook his head, wishing he had something else to offer, wishing that Judith hadn't been so horribly cruel. He raised his eyes to Grudje. "She lied to you," he said, angry tears prickling the corners of his eyes. "Judith is the one who told you I was the key to the Crimson

Thread. But she lied. It's a trick. A horrible, mean trick. On both of us."

"Mr. Potter," the dark figure said, transforming once again into the Collector, "Are you telling me that you *refuse* to give me the Crimson Thread?"

"I'm *telling* you," James said, raising his voice, "That I don't have it to give..." He glanced aside at Ralph. "Last time we saw the Crimson Thread it was in the World Between the Worlds. Only what we saw wasn't really the Crimson Thread at all. It was just a symbol. The real Crimson Thread was a girl. Her name was Morgan. She's dead now. Judith killed her. That's what she does," James returned his gaze to the dark figure before him, his eyes blazing. "Judith kills. She killed Morgan. She killed my cousin Lucy. She'll kill us if she gets the chance. And then, when she's done," James laughed harshly, "why, she'll come and kill *you*."

The Collector's face hardened at this. All the mean glee leaked out of it, leaving only hard-eyed viciousness. He straightened.

"So be it," he said coldly, almost petulantly. "If you do not wish to play my game, Mr. Potter, then I am afraid I have no use for you at all. Ms. Hendricks," he looked past James, addressing Nastasia. "Kill them."

James couldn't quite believe his ears. Could it be this sudden? This antidimactic? Were he, Ralph and Rose about to be killed by a girl their own age, a traitor with pink hair and a nose ring?

He turned, but Nastasia was no longer behind him. She was moving around them to join the Collector, her eyes firm as she glared at James, her wand still raised.

The Collector stood back to allow her room. "This is the first time you've killed, is it not, Ms. Hendricks?"

Nastasia nodded, not hesitantly, but eagerly. "I've practiced plenty. On the target dummies back at Alma Aleron. But this is the first time for real."

"For real is the only time that counts," the dark figure said wisely, his bones crackling slightly as he transformed back into Professor Avior. "I know that you have feelings for James. This could make killing him somewhat difficult for you. Practice on the other two first. Begin with Ms. Weasley."

"Wait!" James cried, trying to push Rose behind him, but she shoved him away.

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“Don’t be stupid, James!” she hissed. “You’re very noble and all, but it’s pointless.”

Suddenly, Ralph lunged forward, rushing Nastasia where she stood and inexplicably jamming his hand into his robes. Nastasia leapt backwards, pivoting her wand wildly.

“Avada...!” she shouted, but Ralph was too fast. He bowled into her, driving her backwards into the Alma Aleron cabinet. Their combined weight knocked the cabinet off balance. It teetered and crashed to the floor with Ralph and Nastasia atop it. James threw himself forward to help his friend, but a blast of red blinded him, emanating from the struggling pair. Ralph flew backwards, repulsed by the blast, and bashed against the Durmstrang cabinet, knocking it over as well.

“Stay!” Nastasia shouted furiously, struggling upright and pointing her wand at James. James skidded to a halt while Avior laughed wheezily.

“Excellent, Ms. Hendricks,” he said encouragingly. “One must be ready for anything, up to and including physical attack. Very spirited response, if a bit clumsy. You will learn refinement.”

Rose joined James, trembling with rage and fear. “Did you kill him?” she demanded, her voice glassy.

“Not yet,” Nastasia admitted, her breath coming in harsh pants, her pink hair wild over her flushed face. “You heard the Professor. I’m to kill *you* first.”

On the floor, Ralph moaned.

“Do it, Ms. Hendricks,” Rechter Grudje instructed. “He comes around. Let us waste no more time with pointless talk and brute confrontation.”

Nastasia nodded. She levelled her wand at Rose and took a step closer, breathing hard through her nose.

“Avada...”

James pushed himself in front of Rose again, but she only shoved him back once more. “Stop it, you git!” she rasped angrily, hopelessly. “You think I want to watch you die in front of me?” She grabbed his hands, refusing to look at Nastasia. Instead, she squeezed her eyes tight shut.

James waited breathlessly. Five seconds passed. There was no flash of deadly green.

He looked aside, still grasping his cousin’s hands.

Nastasia stood exactly as before, wand extended, panting hard through her nose. “*Avada...!*” she said again, more loudly.

“Do it!” Grudje commanded.

Nastasia opened her mouth to finish the killing curse. What came out, however, was her own name: “Nastasia!” she shouted.

James blinked at her in confusion. *Avada Nastasia?* Rose opened her eyes, glancing aside at the pink-haired girl. Nastasia’s wand trembled in her hand.

“Nastasia!” she called again, apparently involuntarily. Her eyes seemed to lose focus, to drift, almost to look in two different directions. “Nasti-ashya!” she shouted. Then, more emphatically, “Nasti! *Ashya!*” James had the eerie, haunting sense that Nastasia was arguing with herself.

“Nasti!” she cried, the wand gradually lowering in her hand. “Ashya!”

“NASTI!”

“ASHYA!”

Grudje strode forward impatiently. He reached to wrench Nastasia’s wand out of her hand, to do the horrible deed himself, but she flicked her wand, barely even pointing it at him and without so much as a sidelong glance. The old man was thrown backwards amidst another flash of red light. He tumbled over Ralph and collapsed to the floor between the fallen cabinets. With a sudden, spasmodic movement, Nastasia gripped her wand in both fists, twisted it, and snapped it in half.

“What’s she doing?” Rose begged in a shrill voice, unable to take her eyes from the chanting, shouting girl in front of her.

“She’s losing control of herself,” James said weakly.

As if to emphasize his words, Nastasia’s face began to transform. It happened with surprising, horrible speed. Her pink hair shrank away while her pupils grew, expanding to fill her eyes completely, turning them into inky black orbs. Her cheeks and nose flattened while her mouth grew wide, spreading all the way to her quickly vanishing ears. And still the mouth spoke, chanting her dual names, turning raspy and hoarse. Her tongue flicked out, long and red. Nastasia’s entire body grew thinner. Her arms sucked up into her sleeves. Her legs snapped together beneath her skirt, melding into one, sinewy appendage.

It was horrible to watch, but James was not entirely surprised. He knew this was what happened to Nastasia when she went to war with herself.

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And that was why what happened next was so completely and utterly shocking.

“Nasty!” the snake’s mouth hissed. “ASHYA!” And with a wet crackle of bone and a horrible, violent jerk, the head split in half.

Rose screamed, shrinking against James, still holding his hands in a death grip. James could not tear his eyes from the sight. As Nastasia’s body continued to narrow, to slither hypnotically inside her clothes, *two* snake heads split from her collar, each one hissing its name, fighting for dominance over the other. Two tails coiled on the stone floor, thrashing and curling.

James jumped back as the Nastasia-thing fell forward, losing its ability to stand upright. Out of her limp clothing slithered two snakes, each the size of a giant python, one black and oily, the other bright pink with glinting, sharp scales. Both snakes hissed at each other viciously, circling, rising atop their coils and baring horrible, glistening fangs. Then, in an explosion of lithe violence, they fell to battle. The snakes curled and thrashed around each other, forming a blur of whipping coils and snapping jaws, each still hissing its name in a battle for dominance.

Ralph stumbled around the melee, his forehead bleeding from his collision with the Durmstrang cabinet. “What the ruddy hell!?” he cried breathlessly, grabbing James’ arm.

“We have to get out of here!” James declared, pulling Ralph and Rose back from the battling snakes. “To the Great Hall while we still have a chance!”

“Oh, I think not!” a rough voice cried madly. A hand gripped James’ shoulder, clutching like iron. Another fell on Ralph, fisting in his robes and yanking him off balance. Stumbling, fighting against the iron-like hands, James was dragged around the thrashing snakes, away from the classroom door.

“You really are simply a *constant* source of trouble,” the Collector growled through gritted teeth, hefting James and Ralph toward the Beauxbatons cabinet. Rose followed, beating uselessly at him with her fists. “Fortunately,” he went on, seething through a sick grin, “I pride myself in my *resourcefulness!*”

He shoved James into the vanishing cabinet, bashing him against its rear wall. Ralph was thrown in after him, followed by Rose, who fought and thrashed furiously against the Collector’s unnatural strength.

“I will grant you this,” the Collector gasped, his eyes dancing with mad rage, “You are intrepid, and you are far luckier than any mere rabble-rousers should ever expect to be!” Behind him, the black and pink snakes wrestled on, thumping wildly, their ten foot bodies twined in vicious struggle. “But I daresay none of that will help you cover a thousand miles in the next thirty minutes! *Au Revoir*, my troublesome young friends!” He cackled shrilly.

James struggled to jump out of the cabinet, along with Ralph and Rose, but the door slammed upon them, closing them in seamless darkness.

“No!” James shouted, but it was no use. A flash of light filled the compartment, accompanied by a sickening lurch, like a lift suddenly dropping in its shaft. A moment later, gravity reasserted itself, propelling the three students out of the cabinet, tumbling them onto a cold, marble floor.

James clambered around, aware that he was in an entirely new space, echoing and flooded with golden light. People were milling around, chattering, but James barely registered them. He looked up at the cabinet he had just fallen out of. Its doors creaked slowly shut as he watched, revealing a woodcut of the Hogwarts crest, split so that half adorned each door.

He jumped up, threw himself into the cabinet again, and without waiting for Ralph and Rose, jerked the doors shut.

There was no flash, no sickening jolt. The doors merely creaked open again slightly, letting in the curious gaze of a collection of blue-robed girls. Ralph and Rose clambered to their feet in front of them. Rose opened the doors fully, her face tense and pale.

“Broken,” James announced helplessly. “Or destroyed on the other side. He shut it down somehow. Closed off our only way back.”

Rose’s mouth opened soundlessly, dumb with shock. Next to her, Ralph’s face was a mask of frustrated anger. Blood still trickled freely down his forehead and cheek. French voices babbled all around and James finally recognized where they were: Beauxbatons, of course, in the gilded and richly vaulted atrium at the centre of the school. Broad white staircases leapt up in twin curves on either side, lined with brass-framed windows.

“What are *you* lot doing here?” a voice-- thankfully not speaking French-- called out.

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Ralph and Rose turned, looking back as a figure approached. James did not think it was possible, but his spirits dropped even further at the sight. Morton Comstock strode toward them, his head cocked and a sardonic smile cinching the corner of his mouth. “Don’t tell me you actually came to help get Professor Moreau safely back home after all this time. If so, you only missed it by about three hours. His welcome home party was quite an event. Nobody celebrates like the French, eh?”

James shook his head, unwilling even to formulate a response to Comstock’s irritating prattle. Wearily, helplessly, he stepped out of the useless cabinet.

“We have to get back,” he said. “If we don’t…”

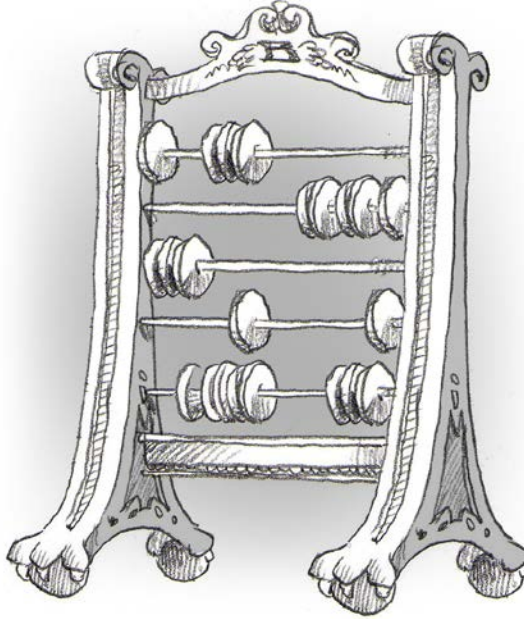
“Everyone dies,” Ralph nodded darkly. “But how? Like that madman said, it’s impossible! A thousand miles in thirty minutes!”

“Wait a minute…” Rose suddenly said, her eyes sharpening. She glanced back at Comstock. “Where, exactly, did this professor Moreau just get back from?”

Comstock scoffed and adjusted his glasses. “You mean where *didn’t* he just get back from,” he chortled. “You lot just don’t *get* Advanced Arithmetics at all, do you?”

Dismissing Comstock, Rose turned back to James and Ralph, her eyes bright with intent. “I think,” she said, raising a hand to point at the Muggle boy, “we just might be able to travel that thousand miles after all…”





23. COLLECTIVE CONSTANT

“It isn’t like a cab, you know,” Comstock said, straightening his glasses as Rose hurried him along. “You can’t just hop across countries neat as you please. It’s complicated!”

“That’s why *you’re* along,” James said, turning left at a tall, marble archway and hurrying between a pair of impeccable suits of armour. Sky-blue vaulted ceilings, decorated with winking golden stars, spread away for what seemed miles. Beneath them, dressed in normal clothes with only a few robes in sight, were a scattering of Beauxbatons students, some levitating trunks, others lounging in alcoves on collections of baroque chairs and sofas, all looking up curiously as James, Rose, Ralph and Comstock sped past.

“Who are these, Morton?” a tall girl in jeans and a Rig Mortis tee shirt called curiously.

“Hi Adela,” Comstock called back as Rose hurried him on. “Friends, er, I guess.”

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“*Moorr-ton!*” a trio of younger girls walking in the opposite direction sang, giggling. The ginger-haired one in the middle waved. “*Pas si tôt!* Change your mind about the dancing lessons?”

Morton gave a forced laugh. “Some other time, Mirielle. I’m busy, apparently.”

“Wait a minute,” Ralph frowned, wheeling Comstock around another corner. “You’re *popular* here?”

“It’s a little something called *personality*,” Comstock declared with a sniff. “You lot could learn a thing or two. Which reminds me,” he added, turning to Rose. “Your cousin Dominique says she still wants that hairbrush back you borrowed Christmas before last.”

“If we survive tonight,” Rose rolled her eyes, “It’ll be first thing on my to-do list.”

James spied the Advanced Arithmancy classroom ahead, beyond a pair of high, bevelled doors. “Can you do it, Comstock?” he asked, dragging the boy forward at a trot. “Can you send us back to Hogwarts using those giant abacuses?”

“Abaci,” both Rose and Comstock corrected simultaneously. They glanced at each with mutual irritation. “Short answer,” Comstock went on, “No. You don’t understand a thing about how it works. It would be daft to even try.”

“I thought you were a genius at this?” James demanded irritably. “Don’t start telling me now that it won’t work.”

Comstock jerked his elbow away from James’ fist. “I can’t *send* you there because the support arithmicians don’t do the sending!” he exclaimed irritably. “That’s just not how it works! What’s the big rush, anyway? Why are you lot even here?”

Rose, who’d been pacing briskly ahead of the three boys, came to an abrupt stop in the corridor. She gathered herself for a brief moment, hands raised slightly in front of her in a calming gesture, and then spun around to face Comstock.

“You were there in the forest the night we found the dead warlock. Yes?”

Comstock blinked at her, obviously reluctant to revisit the memory. “Erm... yes. Not to put too fine a point on it, but it was me what found him.”

Rose nodded curtly. “He was a very bad wizard, and he was working with an even worse wizard. Together they created a sort of super

weapon that's going to kill a whole load of people in, oh, about twenty-five minutes. Our parents are among them." She glared at Comstock, letting the full weight of her gaze bore into him like a drill. "If we get back immediately, we may be able to stop it. If not, well, the whole world is likely about to drop straight off into global war and chaos. So. Morton. Can you help us get back to Hogwarts? Or can't you?"

Morton returned Rose's gaze blankly, seemingly frozen in place. James waited as patiently as he could. Fleeting, he wished he had his wand with him, if only so he could send a quick stinging hex into the boy's ample backside, shocking him into action.

Finally, glancing from Rose, to James, then Ralph, Comstock drew a quick, resolute sigh. "What we waiting for, then? We've got some abaci to man."

James nearly laughed with relief. Together, the four students broke into a run.

"So how does it work, then?" Ralph asked haltingly as he jogged.

"The base concept is marvellously simple," Comstock answered, his voice echoing in the corridor along with his heavy footsteps. "Have you lot heard of this thing called technomancy?"

"We've taken a class or two," Rose prodded. "Go on!"

"Well it turns out," Comstock panted, warming to the subject, "that the entire bleedin' universe is held together by magic. It's this thing called the Collective Constant, and it connects every bit of everything with every other bit of everything else! Nothing's independent! If you manipulate one bit of the Collective Constant, every other bit is manipulated right along with it!"

Rose squinted thoughtfully as she ran. "It's almost like the entire universe is connected by a giant Protean charm..."

"Fascinating," James exclaimed breathlessly as they pelted into the Advanced Arithmetics classroom, which was dark except for the golden glow of the corridor beyond. He stumbled to a halt amidst the hulking rows of abaci. "But how does that take us to Hogwarts?"

"Well that's the really cool bit," Comstock said, passing James and gesturing toward the dark abaci. "It doesn't!"

Ralph shook his head irritably. Running always made him grumpy. "You're not making any sense!"

"Nothing *takes you* to Hogwarts," Comstock said, a note of triumph in his voice, "because *you* bring Hogwarts to *you*!"

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Rose's eyes widened excitedly. "Somehow, we disengage from the Collective Constant!" she said in an awed voice. "Like stepping off a merry-go-round! Except the merry-go-round is all the rest of the universe!"

Comstock nodded eagerly. "Then, you just move the Constant around you until the universe is where you need it to be!"

"This," Ralph said with feeling, "is completely and absolutely mental."

"It's not mental," James sighed impatiently. "It's just quantum."

"It's both," Ralph insisted.

"We don't have any choice," Rose overrode him. "We have to try it. Morton, what do we do?"

"Simple, really," Comstock said, and then seemed to change his mind. "Actually, not simple at all. Mind-bogglingly complex, really. But fortunately for you three that's my bit. See, once you disengage from the Collective Constant, you just need to move the universe around you until it's where you want it to be. Step back into the Constant and bammo, bob's your uncle. Me, I have to do all the calculations on my end to keep you from turning the universe all inside out and wibbly-wobbly."

Rose looked aghast. "It can't be that dangerous! Can it?"

"So I'm overstating it just a bit," Comstock shrugged, moving in front of an abacus and cracking his knuckles. "Mostly, I'll just be keeping you lot from accidentally dragging yourselves through any supermassive black holes and whatnot. Should be manageable enough since you'll be keeping it in the celestial ballpark. No flings out to Neptune. Although Professor Moreau apparently has a nice flat there."

"Are you sure you can do this by yourself?" Ralph asked sceptically.

"Are you sure you lot can find Hogwarts without a map?" Comstock replied snidely. "You do your bit, I'll do mine."

James ran a hand through his hair in exasperation. "So exactly *how do* we do our bit, then? How do we disengage from the... Constant... thingy?"

"There's an incantation for it," Comstock shrugged. "That's the bit I can't help you with. Takes plain old magic. I've watched Benoit practice it a hundred times. Swish around all three of you, a quick flick upwards, and 'divellere!' Nice and clear."

James turned to look at Comstock, his stomach dropping precipitously. “We need *wands* for this to work?”

“Well, not all of you, I suppose,” Comstock frowned. “But one of you, yeah, of course. How else you going to manipulate the Constant? Your bare hands?” He sniggered.

“But we don’t *have* our wands!” James nearly shouted.

“Well,” Comstock blinked, taken aback. “What kind of magical people are you then?”

“Hold on,” Ralph said, digging into the inner pocket of his robes. “I think I can help.” When he withdrew his hand, he was holding his enormous wand. Its lime green tip glowed faintly in the shadows.

“Ralph!” James exclaimed, beside himself with relief. “But how...?”

“My wand was never in the trunk,” Ralph grinned sheepishly. “I had it hidden behind it so I could remove the *Visum Ineptio* spell and unlock it. By the time Grudje confiscated the trunk, this was already in my pocket.”

“But... but!” James stammered. “Then why didn’t you use it on Nastasia?”

“I meant to,” Ralph admitted. “I was going for it just when she stunned me.”

“I really could just about kiss you right now, Ralph,” Rose said seriously. “But we need to fly. What was the incantation again, Morton?”

“*Divellere*,” Comstock repeated, pantomiming the accompanying motion. “Draw a circle around all three of you with the wand, then flick it straight up.”

Ralph nodded and gathered a deep breath. James and Rose clustered as close to him as possible, one on each side. Carefully, slowly, Ralph levelled his wand and began to turn in place, shuffling his feet as he went. James and Rose shuffled with him, careful to stay in the invisible arc defined by the green point of Ralph’s wand.

“It doesn’t look like it’s doing anything,” James muttered.

“Belt up!” Rose admonished. “You’ll jinx it!”

Ralph completed the circle. Then, jerking his wand straight up, he exclaimed “*Divellere!*”

Nothing happened, except that Comstock reached forward with both hands and shuffled half a dozen abacus beads. They clacked into

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place firmly. Then, without looking up at James, Rose and Ralph, he seemed to wait.

“What now?” James asked him. Strangely, Comstock seemed to ignore him. James grew anxious. “Hey! What do we do now? It didn’t work! Try again?”

Comstock continued to ignore him. He stared at the beads of the abacus, studying them intently.

“I’ll give it another go--” Ralph said, but as he thrust forth his wand again, the classroom sped away from them in a shocking blur of motion. Rose gasped as walls flickered past, showing micro-glimpses of life around Beauxbatons. An instant later, the entire palace itself shrank away to the size of a model, albeit a model with absolutely perfect detail, right down to the banks of glowing windows, deep blue conical roofs, streams of pencil-thin white smoke issuing from dozens of chimneys, and the moon-washed white cliff upon which the building sat. Pine trees blanketed the surrounding hills and valleys, deep blue in the darkness.

“Whatever you do,” Ralph said, his teeth gritted with concentration, “Don’t... look... down...”

James immediately looked down. Beneath his feet was nothing but empty space, falling away for what appeared to be hundreds of feet. A hawk wheeled far below, stitching its shadow across a dusky, shushing forest.

“Your wand,” Rose whispered, sounding both terrified and giddy. “Move it again, Ralph! But... *slower* this time.”

Gently and gingerly, Ralph prodded his wand forward about an inch. In response, the palace of Beauxbatons shrank away to a mere pinprick of pale blue, accompanied by a blast of cool night air. A blur of hills and valleys unrolled beneath James’ feet. Villages, fields, ribbons of roads dotted with occasional distant headlights, all raced away, rolling over the arc of the horizon beneath a haze of distance. James’ head swam with the sight. In less than a second, however, the motion slowed and ceased. Now, the three students were hovering high over a gentle coastline, dark land running away on the far side, glittering moonlit ocean directly below. Boats dotted the tiny waves, looking like waterbugs from so great a height.

“It’s all in your wand,” Rose breathed. She glanced aside at Ralph, her eyes bright.

Ralph lowered his gaze to his wand, trying very hard to hold it still. “So...” he said slowly. “I move us around by moving my wand...?”

“Weren’t you paying any attention at all?” Rose scolded impatiently. “*We’re* staying perfectly still! When you move your wand, you move the *entire universe* around us! And Comstock’s keeping track of its progress and smoothing out all the wrinkles as we go! That’s why he was just sitting there while we thought the spell hadn’t worked. We hadn’t gone anywhere yet, so he had nothing to manage!”

Ralph screwed his face up in concentration. He nodded slowly, then changed his mind and shook his head. “This whole thing is completely mental,” he said again, emphatically.

“Who cares how it works,” James interrupted. “We’re going the wrong way. And nowhere near fast enough! We have to go back across France, up past England! Go, Ralph! Quit bodging about!”

Ralph sighed again, steeling himself. Then, in a long, swift motion, he jerked his wand backwards over his shoulder.

The world bowled away beneath them, rolling forward this time. Clouds blasted past them in great, whumping ripples. Cities sped beneath their feet in streaks of yellow light. Mountains rose up ahead and shrank away behind in mere moments. Even the moon wheeled slowly overhead, passing in and out of hazes and fogs, flickering through banks of storm clouds.

A strip of glimmering blue water rolled over the curve of the earth, dividing the dark mass of the land.

“Is that a river?” James called, raising his voice over the rushing bawl of the wind.

“It’s the English Channel!” Rose cried back. “And beyond it, that’s got to be London already!”

The world was slowing down beneath them, unspinning gradually.

“More, Ralph!” James prodded. “We’re barely half-way!”

Ralph nodded. He took a step backward, somehow managing to remain in exactly the same place, and swept his arm back again, drawing his wand in a long, sweeping arc.

Immediately, the earth wheeled away beneath them again. The English Channel whipped past. London streaked beneath, a mere blur of lights and snarl of gridded streets, instantly replaced by open country.

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Small towns and villages swept below like comets, connected by looping country lanes and fat motorways, studded with lights.

“Here we come!” Rose proclaimed, pointing ahead, her hair whipping wildly about her face. “Slow us down, Ralph!”

“How!?” the big boy called back shrilly.

“I don’t know!” Rose said. “Just do it!”

The world spun away below, blending into foothills and craggy cliffs. Forests whickered past, covered with blankets of cool night air. Mountains rose in jagged peaks ahead, unspooling toward them with shocking speed.

James glanced aside at Ralph. “Bring us lower!” he said, pantomiming vaguely with his hands. “And slower!”

Ralph swept his wand forward again carefully, gripping it now with both hands. In response, the earth’s sickening spin became a mere roll. Gradually, it seemed to sweep upwards, rising to meet them.

“Easy!” Rose shouted, hanging onto Ralph’s elbow. “Careful!”

“I’m being as careful as I can!” Ralph declared tersely. “I’ve got the entire universe in my hands here!”

“There!” James cried, stabbing a finger forward. “That’s Hogmeade! See? There’s the train tracks and everything!”

Rose nodded, forgetting her fear as familiar landmarks began to slide beneath them. “Just a little to the left, Ralph...” she instructed, calming her voice. “Right over those trees. See? There’s the lake! We’re almost there!”

Amazingly, Ralph seemed to be getting the hang of what he was doing. He moved his wand in gentle forward and back sweeps, tilting it slightly this way and that, as if the universe was a ball of cotton candy he was bouncing on its lime-green tip.

Hogwarts castle heaved into view, rising over the trees of the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid’s hut drifted below, followed by grassy grounds, awash in moonlight. The windows of the great hall glittered like molten gold.

“Brr!” James declared suddenly, hugging himself as the castle swept closer, filling his vision. “Why’s it so cold?”

Rose glanced around, her face pale in the night air. “Yeah,” she said in a worried voice. “This is no summer chill. I think it’s... it is! Look! It’s actually snowing!”

She pointed. Sure enough, as Ralph manipulated the castle beneath them, turning it gently, flecks of white blurred past, tossed like confetti in an icy wind.

“Something’s really wrong,” James muttered as the world slowed, rising to meet them. “This is bad...”

“Should we go straight into the Great Hall?” Ralph asked, still concentrating on his wand, nudging the universe with gentler and gentler motions. “Only it’s pretty hard to park this thing on a dime, you know...”

“No!” Rose declared suddenly. “Not yet! We need to make one stop on the way.”

“What do you mean ‘make a stop?’” James demanded. “Like Comstock said, this isn’t a cab!”

“Just trust me, James,” Rose insisted. She pointed to the right, toward Gryffindor Tower. “Over there! The east turret...”

“You want us to stop in the girls’ dormitory?” Ralph clarified with a nervous frown.

“Oh good grief,” Rose declared tersely. “Close your eyes if you think you must. No one will be there at this hour. I need something.”

Ralph gave a resigned sigh and steered the universe in a wide arc, drawing Gryffindor Tower toward them. In mere seconds it filled their view so that James could see every stone, every line of mortar. Then, with a cold shudder, Ralph teased the Tower over them. They passed through the stone walls and found themselves in a circular room, thankfully unoccupied. Beds lined the walls, mostly unmade, surrounding a neat iron stove.

“Looks just like the boys’ dormitory,” Ralph commented.

“Only I expected it to be... neater, somehow,” James added.

Rose rolled her eyes. “I’ll just be a moment.”

“This better be important,” James sighed tersely.

Rose stepped carefully away from Ralph. As she did, she seemed to pass out of a sort of invisible boundary. She stumbled for a moment, as if the orientation of the universe was slightly different from that of Ralph’s conjured bubble. Recovering quickly, however, she dashed to one of the beds (it was neatly made, James noticed) and knelt before the trunk at its footboard. She opened it, rummaged in it briefly, then straightened and hurried back toward James and Ralph. When she neared them, she stopped and blinked vaguely.

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“Where are you?” she whispered, waving her left hand through the air as if feeling for something. In her right hand was a small, powder blue brocade purse.

“We’re right here!” James rasped back. She did not respond to his voice, any more than Comstock had when James had called to him earlier. Apparently, the same magic that disengaged them from the universe and allowed them to fly through walls like ghosts also made them undetectable to anyone outside the spell’s influence.

James reached forward, careful to keep the rest of his body in the sphere cast by Ralph’s wand, and grasped Rose’s groping hand. She recoiled instinctively, and then allowed him to tug her inside. She stumbled again, reorienting to the spell’s unique gravity.

“What’s that, then?” James demanded, pointing at the purse in Rose’s hand.

“Never you mind,” she hissed impatiently. “Ralph, take us down to the Great Hall! We’ve got less than twenty minutes, if Grudje-- or the Collector, or Avior or whoever he was-- wasn’t lying about when the Morrigan Web was to go off.”

James heaved a quick sigh and nodded at Ralph. “Let’s go,” he concurred.

“What we going to do when we get there, then?” Ralph asked, sweeping his wand gently forward again, nudging back the universe. The girls’ dormitory swept away, replaced with the stone walls of Gryffindor Tower and its many nested turrets.

“I don’t know,” James replied honestly. “I guess we’ll do what we always do.”

“And what’s that?” Rose inquired, clutching the pale blue purse with both hands as Ralph turned the castle below them, heaving the Great Hall into view.

James shrugged helplessly. “We figure it out as we go,” he answered.



It was snowing harder now. Great, fat flakes skirled and billowed in the wind, streaking past the golden windows of the Great Hall as Ralph drew it closer, teasing it into position before them. It was a deeply unsettling feeling-- the bizarre summer snowstorm; the sensation of manipulating the entire universe around them; the knowledge that this last moment of relative calm and serenity would soon succumb to tense action as they attempted to stop the Morrigan Web...

The windows grew larger, larger as Ralph drew them closer, flicking his wand deftly. James could see the ripples in the ancient glass as one window drifted to fill his vision. Shapes moved beyond it, moving like things glimpsed underwater. Then, with a thump and a shudder, the window swept past them and they were inside the Great Hall. A constellation of floating candles surrounded them, flickering benignly beneath the enchanted ceiling (which showed hulking storm clouds and silently blowing snowflakes). James looked down from his curious perspective. The long house tables had been transformed into a dozen large round tables, each covered in immaculate white cloth and decked with golden plates, crystal goblets, and massive floral arrangements from the greenhouses. Around the tables were dozens of people, all chattering noisily, nodding with excitement, presiding over the dregs of what appeared to have been a singularly sumptuous banquet. As James watched, the Russian President (identified by the notecard and flag positioned in front of his place setting) raised his empty goblet, watching with cautious wonder as it refilled itself in mid-air.

"The Clock!" Rose exclaimed in a hushed voice, pointing. "Put us down over there beneath it, behind all the headmaster portraits... perhaps no one will notice us right away."

Ralph nodded and twisted his wand, tilting the universe gently to the left, wheeling it around so that the clock swam closer. Beneath them, the replica of the Fountain of Magical Brethren glimmered, sending its geysers of water up, around, and through them. James could smell the crispness of the water but felt nothing of it as it passed.

"Lily and the rest of the student ambassadors seem to be taking a break," James said, spying his sister sitting amidst a collection of classmates on a small terraced pedestal to the right of the dais. They were

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chattering to themselves in hushed voices, smiling and pointing discreetly at the various world leaders. “We have to get them out of here!”

“If we can just disenchant the Clock,” Rose insisted tensely. “Then everything will be fine!”

Ralph nudged his wand up in gentle flourishes, almost as if he was painting with it, and the dais rose beneath them. The portraits of the headmasters, seen from the back, drifted upwards to block the view of the rest of the Hall.

“Now!” Rose whispered.

“How do we stop all this Collective Constant stuff, then?” Ralph asked, bringing his wand to a trembling halt. “Comstock forgot to tell us that bit!”

“Try the incantation again,” James suggested. “With a downward flick this time.”

Ralph shrugged gamely, still keeping his wand as steady as possible. In a hushed voice, he said, “*Divellere!*” and flicked the wand straight down.

James stumbled as his feet struck the floor of the dais. For a moment there was a sense of extreme disorientation, as if the universe had somehow just remembered he was there and had forcibly reclaimed him, then all the axes of reality seemed to realign again.

“That was a good guess, James,” Rose gasped, putting a hand to her throat.

Ralph took half a step forward, his shoulders stooped, and peeked between two of the headmaster portraits and the fountain beyond. “I don’t think anyone’s noticed us,” he whispered.

James joined Ralph, peering out at the chattering crowd. Titus could be seen roaming carefully around the perimeter of the hall. Lucinda Lyon seemed to be stationed by the door.

James glanced down. Rose was on her hands and knees next to him, reaching through the brass legs of one of the portrait easels toward the pattering fountain beyond.

“Rose!” he nudged her with his foot. “What are you doing?”

“Quit it!” she rasped up, still straining toward the fountain. “This isn’t as easy as it looks!”

“It *looks* like you’re about to get us caught!”

“Fine,” she proclaimed, dropping back onto her haunches and wiping a trickle of sweat from her brow. “So what do we do now?”

James glanced up. From this angle, the enormous five-faced Clock was a gilded monstrosity, its gears, flywheels and pendulums clearly visible behind the complicated scrollwork and ivory faces. Only the central face continued to mark the time, ticking audibly with a noise like spider legs dancing on sheet-ice.

“We need to get inside it,” James whispered, nodding up to the Clock. “We have to get Magnussen’s cane out of it if we can.”

“But that’s not how it works!” Rose whispered back, grabbing his shoulder. “If we just remove it, the Morrigan Web will trigger early!”

“Well, that was your parents plan, wasn’t it?” Ralph said, huddling down behind them.

“*They* didn’t know it was a mistake,” Rose rolled her eyes, “because *you two* forgot to tell them! Lucky for all of us the Chalice wasn’t the trigger. The cane *is*. If we just yank it out, it’ll release all of its energy right then and there!”

“So how do we stop it, then?” James asked fearfully, glancing from Ralph to Rose.

Rose bunched her fists in frustration. “How should I know? It was your bloody idea to make it up as we go!”

“Wait a minute,” Ralph interjected, narrowing his eyes. “Crone Laosa said that the relic could be *replaced*. But it had to be replaced with something equally as powerful...”

“And something belonging to the same person,” Rose nodded impatiently. “But what good would that do?”

“No!” James said, struggling to keep his voice hushed. “She said it had to be replaced with something *related* to the same person! It doesn’t have to have belonged to them. It just has to be connected to them somehow.”

“That’d have to be one ruddy strong connection,” Ralph breathed, shaking his head. “Either way, where are we going to find such a thing? We’ve only got about eighteen minutes left!”

“What ho,” a deep voice interrupted, not whispering in the least. “How’d I know I might encounter you lot here?”

Ralph startled so violently that he fell over, very nearly taking the row of headmaster portraits with him. James slumped, recognizing the voice. He turned and glanced behind him.

“Hi Titus,” Rose sighed. “Nothing much gets past you, does it?”

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“In this case,” Titus Hardcastle rumbled, his wand held lazily in one ham-sized hand, “It’s less professional vigilance and more long-time familiarity. After what your parents did, I had a feeling I’d be seeing you tonight. Up with you both. Deedle, too. And hand over your wands.”

“We don’t have our wands,” Rose replied, giving Ralph a brief warning glance. “Headmaster Grudje confiscated them all.”

Hardcastle nodded. “Heard about that, actually. Thank heaven for small favours.”

“Titus,” James said quickly, rising to his feet. “You have to listen to us. We’re not here to pull a prank or anything stupid like that. We’re here because something horrible is about to happen in a few minutes and we have to stop it! If you help--”

“Oh, I already know all about it,” Titus nodded, prodding the students ahead of him, taking them off the dais and toward the student ambassador’s pedestal. “Your father explained it in great detail on the way back to the castle. The Morrigan Web, he said. Worst weapon in the whole wizarding world. Going to kill us all with an interconnected blast of concentrated magic.”

“Yes!” James nodded, a small surge of hope welling in his chest. “Except it wasn’t the Crystal Chalice, like we first thought! It’s the Clock! Right there! You can help us get it down! You can--”

“I can place you in temporary custody right here in the Great Hall,” Titus interrupted tersely, “and thank you not to make a scene. I’ve already briefed the Minister on the false alarm your father raised. The last thing we need is for you lot screaming bloody murder in front of the whole world, wizarding and Muggle alike. You’ll sit here with the student ambassadors and not say a single word. Understand?”

“But Titus!” Rose insisted. “It’s not a false alarm! It’s--”

“Not... Another... Word!” Titus growled dangerously, showing them his wand. “I don’t want to have to Langlock you, but I will to keep you quiet if that’s what it takes.”

He placed a hand each on Ralph’s and James’ shoulders, shoving them firmly into a seat on the bottom terrace of the small podium. Rose remained standing next to them, a look of wild alarm on her face. She dared not speak lest Titus perform the Langlock curse on her, silencing her completely. But she dared not remain silent either.

“James!” Lily hissed from above and behind him. “What are you *doing* here?”

James could not bring himself even to look back at his sister. Thus far, his plan-- such as it was-- was failing miserably. All around, the world leaders, Muggle and wizarding alike, chattered on obliviously. Chamber music lilted from an enchanted violin, bass and harpsichord, the instruments playing cheerily by themselves to James' left.

And the Clock over the dais ticked onward, the minute hand resting just before the nine. If Avior's threat had been accurate, they had barely sixteen minutes left. Satisfied that the students were subdued, Hardcastle turned away, lowering his wand to his side.

Suddenly, Ralph stirred next to James. He leapt to his feet, brandishing his wand and levelling it at Titus' back.

"Stupef--"

Hardcastle turned so quickly he was nearly a blur. His wand flicked up at the hip, unleashing a thin bolt of white. Ralph slammed back into his seat so hard that the entire row of students above him collapsed backwards, their feet poking into the air and their muffled voices crying out in confusion.

A murmur of alarm rippled through the round tables. Several people leapt to their feet. The Magical Integration Bureau agents around the American President perked up in postures of wary vigilance.

Hardcastle took a swift step forward, grabbed Ralph's wrist with one hand, and wrenched the wand out of it with the other.

"Foolish," he growled furiously. "Very foolish."

"Titus," Rose squeaked, wringing her hands before her chest. "Seriously! This is a huge, *huge* mistake!"

"Quiet!" Hardcastle seethed, "Or I swear you'll be next, and I don't give a hardboiled hippogriff egg who your mum is. Everyone!" he called, turning around, raising Ralph's wand in his meaty fist and putting a grim smile on his face. "Some good-natured school hijinx. Nothing to be concerned with. Everything's under control. Go back to your dinners."

"No!" James exclaimed, leaping to his feet, his voice echoing up into the enchanted rafters. "Everything's definitely *not* under control! Something awful is about to--"

Hardcastle spun on James, his wand flashing upright again, his face red with fury. He was going to hit James with a Langlock curse, silencing him before he could finish his sentence. Instinctively, before

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James even knew what he was doing, he struck out with his right hand, forgetting for a moment that it did not bear a wand.

Magic sprang from his fingers in cold blue arcs. The bolts struck Hardcastle, flinging him right off his feet. He flew through the air and crashed onto the nearest table, sending goblets, tureens, and golden plates scattering like tenpins. The diners gathered around the table recoiled in fear and shock, scrambling to their feet. Half ducked in terror. The other half groped for their wands. The rest of the Hall erupted in a roar of mingled surprise, panic and anger.

“Stop!” James cried out, sweeping his arm before him, palm outwards in a placating gesture, but magic continued to crackle from his fingers like lightning, electric blue and cold as ice, drawing flashing arcs as it swept the air. The crowd recoiled in fear. Even the other Aurors, James noticed, kept a distance, although their wands were raised, trained on him with unwavering accuracy.

“Stun him!” Hardcastle roared, scrambling to climb off the table, the tablecloth tangled in his belt and dragging after him. “Put him down!”

Red bolts sliced through the air from five different directions, converging on James. Each one, however, snuffed harmlessly mere inches from his body, as if an invisible force swirled around him, deflecting the Auror’s spells.

James stared in shock at his own outstretched hand. Tendrils of icy power curled around his fingers, lancing and crackling like a dynamo. He glanced behind him, his eyes wild. Rose merely stared at him, both of her hands clamped over her mouth. Ralph was still half collapsed on the lowest tier of the student ambassador’s pedestal, frozen in the act of struggling up, his eyes wide, lit with the flashing magic of James’ hand.

“I...” James began haltingly, feeling that the room was suddenly waiting to hear from him, “er...we, I mean... are here to help! Everyone, to the doors! We have to get out of here immediately! And as far away as possible!”

This was met with a long moment of complete, bewildered silence. The only person to move was Hardcastle, who had regained his feet and disentangled himself from the table cloth. He glanced around at the stunned crowd. Then, seeming to realize he had lost control of the situation, pointed at the closed double doors at the rear of the hall.

“You heard the boy,” he shouted. “Everyone out, before he does anything else!”

The room was suddenly filled with the squeaking of chairs and the clatter of alarmed feet. Voices arose, first in confused alarm, then in increasing layers of rising panic. James was deeply gratified to see people piling up behind the double doors, clambering to make their exit. This relief, however, quickly soured into sinking dismay as the double doors remained firmly closed, despite the clamouring crowd.

“It’s locked!” Someone shouted.

“Where’s the key!”

“Titus!” This cry came from Lucinda Lyon, from her station by the door. James could just see her craning to look back over the milling, agitated crowd. “Titus! The doors won’t budge! They’re sealed right shut!”

“Stand back!” Hardcastle called, raising his wand and striding forward. The crowd parted before him anxiously, giving him a clear shot at the high double doors.

“James,” Lily said in his ear, her voice small and afraid. “What’s happening? How are you doing that with your hand?”

He shook his head, turning to glance back at her, his hand still raised at arm’s length, crackling with icy blue magic. “I don’t know, Lil. But it’s going to be all right. Just... stay back a bit.”

“*EXPULSO!*” Hardcastle roared, flashing his wand forward with a long, powerful flourish. A bolt of deep blue light shot into the doors, exploding vividly and shaking the very marble floor beneath James’ feet. When the sparks cleared, however, the doors remained, closed and untouched.

The crowd began to scatter, to drift toward the windows in rising anxiety, apparently in the hopes of breaking them.

Hardcastle was ahead of them, however. He levelled his wand again, aiming at the furthest of the Hall’s tall windows. Another blast of blue flashed, accompanied by a massive shudder and explosion of sparks. The window remained whole and completely untouched.

“They’re all frosted over,” Lily said wonderingly. “Look at the glass! It’s covered in ice! Maybe that’s why Titus can’t break through!”

Amazingly, inexplicably, Lily was right. Every window, including the enormous rose window over the dais, was clouded with fronds of ice, coated to the point of opaqueness.

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“James,” Hardcastle demanded, stalking back across the floor, his wand now lowered. “Forget *how*. *Why* are you doing this?”

“I’m not!” James exclaimed, shaking his crackling, lightning-filled hand. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you! Something terrible is about to happen, but I’m not the one doing it!”

“No,” a young woman’s voice interjected coolly. “I am.”

Every eye in the room turned, following the sound of the woman’s voice. She stood on the dais, directly in front of the sparkling, showering fountain and its golden statues.

It was Petra.

To James’ eye, she looked exactly as she had the last time he had seen her. A drab calico dress swung about her legs beneath a pale blue sweater. Her hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail. As he looked at her, she turned her eyes to meet his. They were cold, but not completely devoid of feeling. She cocked her head slightly and raised one hand to him, not in a wave, but in a sort of *catching* motion, as if she was snatching an invisible ball out of thin air.

The crackling ice-magic vanished from James’ hand. He glanced down at it in surprise.

“And I’ll thank you, James,” Petra said with a small, affectionate smile, “not to borrow anymore of my magic.”





24. THE MOST VEXING QUESTION

Leaving Titus standing speechless in the middle of the Great Hall floor, James dashed to meet Petra where she stood before the glittering fountain.

“Petra!” he gasped. “It’s the Clock! You can help us shut it down!”

For some reason, he expected her to show alarm, or to ask what he meant, or to jump down from the dais and join him. Instead-- as he should have known-- she simply nodded at him sadly. “I know it’s the Clock, James. I know what’s inside it. And I know exactly what’s going to happen in fifteen minutes, when the clock strikes eight.”

James looked up at her in dismay. “So, you’re here to help us, right?” he asked, knowing even as he asked that this could not be the case. The ice covering the windows and sealing the door made that all too clear.

“No,” she answered with a deep sigh. “I’m here to watch. And wait.”

Rose joined James, along with Ralph and Lily.

“Hi Petra,” Lily said, giving the older girl a little wave. “Where’s Izzy?”

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“She’s home,” Petra smiled wanly. “Good to see you, Lil. Sorry about all this.”

“But if you know everything that’s going to happen,” Rose declared, “why aren’t you stopping it?”

Petra pressed her lips together in pained irritation. “Look,” she said, finally stepping down from the dais to join James and the others. “I *don’t* know everything that’s going to happen. Why does everyone keep thinking I’m all-knowing somehow? I’m a sorceress, not a prophetess.”

“But,” James said, turning as Petra walked past him, “but you knew what we knew when you met me in your grandfather’s gazebo! And just now you said you knew all about the Clock and Magnussen’s cane and the Morrigan Web!”

“Magnussen’s what?” Hardcastle frowned, drifting closer, his wand at the ready but his hard face creased with confusion. “Whose gazebo?” Behind him, the rest of the dozens of government leaders, ambassadors and diplomats watched with restless agitation and bright, worried eyes. The other Aurors hung back, taking protective positions around the crowd.

“I only know the things that I know,” Petra said, turning back to James and lowering her voice, “because I hired *him!*” She gestured with her right hand. With a crack and a puff of pale smoke, a man appeared next to one of the abandoned tables. He was thin with an unremarkable face and wore a limp fedora hat, a bedraggled trench coat, and a loose burgundy striped tie.

“I’m visible now, right?” he said, glancing around a little nervously. His American accent was unmistakable. “I can tell I’m visible because of all the people suddenly staring at me. Dead giveaway.”

“You’re safe enough, Mr. Parris,” Petra assured him. “I’ve already told you, the Morrigan Web won’t hurt Muggles. The point is,” she turned back to James. “It’s all because of *his* detective work that I know all of this. He tracked down Nastasia Hendricks’ family history. He discovered the connection between Rechter Grudje and Professor Avior. He traced Judith’s movements as she brought the plan together, with everything leading us to here, tonight.”

“Hold up a second,” Hardcastle said, inching still closer to Petra and James, “So this Morrigan Web, it’s really going to go off tonight?”

“That’s what we’ve been trying to tell you!” Rose cried, anger rising in her voice. “Our parents believed us, and *you* arrested them for it!”

Hardcastle ignored her, his eyes still on Petra. “But it won’t hurt any of the Muggles, right?”

Rose rounded on him furiously. “It will once all the witches and wizards are dead and Grudje and his assassins start picking them all off one by one!”

The crowd stirred again, growing tense.

“Petra,” James whispered, moving alongside the dark-haired girl and ignoring the sudden row between Rose and Hardcastle. “My dad’s here. He and Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron, they’re locked up behind the dais, in the antechamber. And Lily is right here with us, not to mention Rose, Ralph... you can let them all out, can’t you?”

She shook her head slowly, not meeting his eyes. “I told you to stay away from all this, James,” she muttered. “I warned you. I can’t help any of you now. I wish I could, but I can’t.”

“But why?” James pressed, becoming desperate. “Petra, why does this have to happen? Why can’t you stop it, or at least let everyone go before it does?”

“The Morrigan Web can’t be stopped!” Petra hissed, her icy façade cracking. “Parris and me, we couldn’t learn much about it, but we do know that once it’s put into motion it’s unstoppable!”

“No!” James interrupted her. “It *can* be stopped! We just need to find something equally--”

She overrode him, raising her voice. “And I can’t let anyone go-- not a single person!-- because if I do, it won’t be as tempting to *her*! She’ll only show up if it’s going to go off exactly as she planned! She won’t risk appearing-- and facing me-- if her plan falls apart! She’ll just start over again with a *new* plan, an even worse plan! She’ll only come if the Morrigan Web is actually going to go off and kill every witch and wizard here! She won’t miss *that* for the world, because she loves death! She lives for chaos! It’s the only thing that will bring her to me!”

“But that’s mad!” James exclaimed, grabbing Petra’s arm, making her face him. “Why, Petra? *Why* do you have to face her?”

“*Because I have to kill her!*” Petra shouted, her voice flying up into the rafters and breaking into rolling echoes.

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The Hall fell silent in the wake of this declaration. Even Hardcastle and Rose stopped their argument. James stared at Petra, shocked and slightly horror-struck. It wasn't that he didn't believe Judith deserved to die. It was that he wasn't certain, even if it cost him and every witch and wizard in the room their lives, that Petra could truly defeat her.

And the worst part was the look on Petra's face. It was uncomfortably clear that, despite her resolve, she doubted this as well.

"That's why you left Izzy somewhere safe," James whispered, understanding dawning on him. "Even though you're more powerful with her at your side, you couldn't risk her life as well."

"I'm willing to die for all this to end," Petra said, firming her jaw and standing straight.

"And for all of us to die as well?"

"It may not come to that," Petra sighed, seeming to shrink slightly before James' eyes. "I hope it won't. If I can defeat her fast enough... if there's still time..."

Behind Petra, something suddenly splashed in the Fountain of the Magical Brethren. James glanced at it, his senses heightened to almost painful alertness, and saw waves slopping over the edge of the reflecting pool. Water slapped at the heels of the statues, growing choppy and rough, as if something large was heaving just beneath the surface.

The already anxious crowd backed away further, pressing futilely against the Hall's main doors, as water began to pour over the ledge of the pool, cascading down the dais and splattering to the stone floor. Then, with a deep, wrenching screech, the statues themselves began to shudder, to tilt, to lean...

"Behind me!" Hardcastle growled urgently, moving to get between the students and the fountain, his wand raised.

In a sing-song voice Petra warned, "I wouldn't do that if I were you..."

On the dais, the wizard statue toppled, tipping forward and crashing over the ledge of the pool. The centaur statue keeled over as well, knocking down a third of the headmaster portraits like a row of dominoes. The witch and house elf followed, bashing against each other, the witch statue breaking in half. Only the statue of the Muggle man remained, tilting and creaking ominously, its hands upraised in pointless rapture. Water continued to slop and cascade over the fountain ledge. The pool water itself heaved up into a sort of glittering, green bulge

around the remaining statue's knees. And then, massively, the bulge burst, disgorging a tall feminine figure, seemingly completely comprised of rushing water. The pool water fell back from her and she began to solidify, even as she stepped forward, rising up out of the pool, and putting her first step onto the wet dais, coming to stand almost exactly where Petra had first appeared.

"Good evening, everyone!" the watery woman announced, her ringing voice still gurgling slightly. "I trust everyone is having an enlightened time!"

Hardcastle fired. His bolt of magic passed right through the glimmering figure, exploding into prisms as it did so. The woman flung out a hand lazily, almost casually, and it turned into a writhing water tentacle. It uncurled across the Hall and whalloped Hardcastle where he stood. For the second time that night, the big Auror flew through the air. This time, however, he struck a table and smashed it in half, sending its contents exploding in all directions with horrible finality. The huddled crowd cringed, screamed, and scattered away from the broken table. In the tinkling aftermath, Hardcastle made no move to get up.

"Petra, darling," the watery woman said, dismissing the sudden violence and stepping down to the main floor. "I've missed you. And I *know* you've missed me. Otherwise, you wouldn't have searched so long and hard to find me. And with your cute pet Muggle to help."

Marshall Parris recognized the reference to himself. Instead of being offended, he reached up and doffed his fedora briefly. "Happy to be of service. I'll just be on my way then."

"You'll be fine, Parris," Petra repeated, not taking her eyes from the approaching watery figure. "I told you, the Web doesn't hurt Muggles."

"Quite right, my sister," the watery figure agreed, finally solidifying fully into the shape James had most dreaded seeing. The Lady of the Lake stood resplendent in a long white dress, its skirts layered with form-fitting scallops and its sleeveless bodice crusted with glittering diamonds. Her thick red hair was pulled up in a high, severe bun. "The Morrigan Web does not hurt Muggles. I do, of course."

"Not if I stop you," Petra said, backing slightly away from Judith, moving into an open space at the centre of the Hall floor. James watched this warily, backing away, pushing Rose, Lily and Ralph behind him.

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“But why stop me?” Judith pressed, offering Petra a disarming smile. “You’ve come this far with me. I assumed you’d had a fortunate change of heart.”

Petra didn’t reply. Instead, she stabbed out with her right hand, her fingers extended toward Judith. A lance of blue-green light streaked through the air. Judith deflected it, but was forced back a step in the process.

“Not interested in talking?” she said, still smiling, but a bit more warily. “It’s been a year, sister. But perhaps you mean to watch the fun with me and then chat afterwards, once our appetites for destruction are sated.”

“I’m not like you,” Petra said calmly, her face set with grim determination. “You love death. I defend life.”

“Confusing, that,” Judith said, frowning playfully. “After all, you set all of this into motion with that wonderful stunt in New Amsterdam, one year ago. And if I am not mistaken, it is your ice that locks these poor fools amongst us, sealing their doom.”

“Only to lure you to face me.”

“You alone?” Judith asked, arching her eyebrows. “No Izzabella? What kind of reunion is it if all three of us aren’t here?”

“This is between you and me,” Petra breathed, still circling Judith, her body tensed and wary. She struck again, using her bare hands to launch another salvo of brilliance at her nemesis. Judith deflected it, this time with a tittering laugh. She retaliated, spinning and firing a bolt of glaring purple at Petra. Petra was prepared, ducking and conjuring a glimmering, glowing shield. Judith’s bolt struck the shield and shattered it, but Petra fainted away, dodging to the left.

“This is pointless, my sister!” Judith called, still laughing. “Keep this up much longer and you’ll miss all the fun!”

Swiftly, Petra turned on the spot, forming a graceful pirouette, and then dropping into a sudden crouch, her left arm raised, her right pointed at Judith, palm up. Above her, every floating candle in the Great Hall swirled, condensed into a tight cyclone of streaking flame and wax, and launched itself like an arrow at the white-clad woman.

Judith crossed her bare fore-arms into an X before her face, and then flung her arms apart again. The arrow of burning candles shattered apart, sending broken candles and hot wax flying all around.

Petra was already moving again. Gesturing with both hands, she levitated a pair of abandoned tables, one on each side. Their tablecloths fluttered and their contents drifted over them, forming coronas of glittering silverware and plates. With a flick of each wrist, Petra flung the tables at Judith. They careened through the air like saw-blades, surrounded by the spinning blurs of their tableware.

Judith clapped her hands and the tables smashed together like cymbals, breaking into dozens of pieces and littering the floor between her and Petra.

“This is pointless, my dear!” she sang out, and yet, to James’ ear, she sounded slightly breathless. It almost looked as if Judith was on the defensive.

Petra struck again. Levitating the golden wizard statue, she pounded it down upon Judith. Judith split it in two before it could strike her, then thrust both halves apart, crashing them against the walls on either side of the Hall. The bun of her hair was becoming frayed, however, and despite her grin, her eyes were haunted, wild, dancing with growing rage. Now, it was Judith who circled, sidling around the clearing in the centre of the floor while Petra stalked her.

“You know, my sister,” Judith called, her voice splintering. “I am beginning to doubt your resolve! Why, I do not believe you mean to murder these many people after all!”

“No, I do not!” Petra shouted, her temper breaking.

“A shame!” Judith replied, still backing away from Petra, circling, drawing close to James once more. “For I was truly enjoying this little contest, and now you’ve handed it to me...”

“I think not,” Petra seethed, tensing to strike once more.

“Oh, but you *have!*” With that, Judith struck first, and with lightning speed. She did not strike at Petra, however. James gasped and lurched backwards as a lance of water shot past him, thin as a blade and glittering like ice, emanating from Judith’s left index finger. He turned to follow her aim and saw the finger of ice stab through Rose’s shoulder, just above her heart. The force of it rammed her back against the stone wall, but did not allow her to fall. She hung from the glittering icy spear, pinned to the wall by it, even as blood began to blossom on her shirt. She looked down at it, her face a mask of pure surprise. The light blue brocade purse fell from her hands, empty.

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“No!” A voice cried out in pained rage. James was surprised that it was not his own. He turned, his senses dulled by shock, and saw Petra striding toward him, her face contorted. “Rose!” she cried, raising her hand toward the bleeding girl.

Judith fired at Petra with her right hand, taking advantage of the diversion. Petra blocked this, but ineffectively, one-handed, still reaching toward Rose with the other, rushing to join her. Judith laughed shrilly and struck again, this time shattering Petra’s defences. A third blast of white light exploded against Petra’s side, knocking her off her feet and bashing her against the front of the dais.

“Such a shame!” Judith chided, her left hand still extended toward Rose, maintaining the spear of ice that impaled her. “A battle of titans, ruined by that most boring of all weaknesses: sentimentality. I am so sincerely disappointed...”

As she spoke, she approached Petra, who was struggling to her feet, dazed. Judith raised her right arm, extending it into another watery tentacle. It snaked toward Petra, twined around her, and lifted her bodily into the air. The slight girl struggled, but her hands went right through the watery shape. In seconds, the tentacle spun Petra into a sort of living, liquid cocoon, completely enclosing her. Judith cackled with delight, loud and glassy, watching as Petra struggled, her hair floating about her in the swirling ball of water, her cheeks bulging, holding onto whatever air she could.

Judith jerked her arm away, breaking contact with Petra’s watery prison, and simultaneously causing it to freeze solid. The enormous ball of ice crashed to the floor, solid as stone, clouded so densely that Petra herself was barely visible inside.

“I hope you at least appreciate the irony,” Judith smiled, cocking her head at the frozen sorceress across from her. “You, my sister, are not the only one who can use ice as a weapon.”

With that, Judith withdrew the icy spear from Rose’s shoulder. Rose collapsed to the floor in a heap, blood running freely down her right side, her face pale and blotchy. James and Ralph ran to her, dropping to their knees beside her and taking her hands, one each.

“Oh!” Judith said, turning toward them and placing a hand to her cheek. “I’m sorry, James Potter. Did I go and kill *another* of your cousins?”

“Rose!” James cried urgently, clutching her hand. “Tell me you’re not dead!”

“I’m not dead,” Rose whispered weakly.

Surprisingly, the Muggle detective, Marshall Parris, hunkered down on James’ right.

“Pressure’s what she needs,” he said under his breath, whipping off his tie. “Saw enough injury reports at the old man’s law office to learn a few things. Wad this up and hold it hard against the wound.” He did so himself, nodding for Ralph to help.

“We have to get her help right away,” Ralph said, his voice low and furious as he pressed the wad of fabric against Rose’s shoulder. “We can’t let it happen this way...”

James nodded helplessly, knowing there was very little they could do.

“So noble!” Judith nodded. “So rich with drama. Does it pain you to know that it’s hopeless? Hmm?”

James looked over his shoulder at her. She smiled at him.

“Your father is about to die, James,” she reminded him, maintaining eye contact. “As he should have last summer. Why, it’s been almost exactly a year, hasn’t it? And now here we are again. And really, it’s so much better this time. The gang is all here! Your aunt and uncle. Your sister. Your friends. And, of course, so many of your marvellous leaders and protectors. But alas,” she interrupted herself, looking away slightly. “We are missing *one* important person...”

She snapped her fingers.

Rechtor Grudje fell out of thin air in front of her, crashing to the floor in an untidy heap. He scrambled, eyes wild, searching his surroundings. When his eyes alit on the woman before him, they narrowed.

“You!” he seethed. “How *dare* you!”

“Oh, I know I’m naughty,” Judith tittered, “But I simply couldn’t let you toil away in your headmaster’s office and miss all the fun, now, could I?”

“You mean to kill me as well as these,” Grudje breathed, his voice vibrating with rage. “But you forget, *I* have no *wand*...!”

He gestured to emphasize his empty hand. The effect was ruined, however, by the wand that sat prominently on his open palm. He startled

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upon seeing it, and made to throw it away. It remained firm and fast, adhered to his hand as if by glue.

Judith clucked her tongue reprovingly. "Such a silly weakness for such a marvellous weapon as the Morrigan Web," she said. "But I've taken care of that, as you can see. Not one person in this Hall will be able to divest themselves of their wand. After all, that would be like cheating, wouldn't it? What, I ask, is a witch or a wizard without their wand?"

"I should have killed you like I killed Worlick," Grudje growled, climbing to his feet and straightening his robes.

Judith giggled dismissively at his threat. "My dear 'Collector', if it hadn't been for me, you and your pathetic Muggle slaves would still be digging through the ruins of New Amsterdam in search of magical trinkets, hoping to concoct *something* powerful enough to fuel the Web. If I had not introduced you to Ms. Hendricks and her ancestor's lovely cane..."

Sighing happily, she glanced up at the Clock.

"But alas, still five minutes to go!" she said, adopting an air of petulant impatience. "What shall we do until then?"

A figure huddled up next to James, squeezing between him and Marshall Parris. He glanced up and saw that it was his sister, Lily. Her face was wide-eyed and pale. The jewelled clip had come out of her hair, leaving it hanging about her face in disarray. On the floor behind her, Judith continued to cast around restlessly.

"I know," she announced suddenly, eagerly. "Let us spare someone!"

A ripple of desperate hope roiled over the crowd. Voices began to call out, volunteering. James glanced around, somewhat gratified to see that almost none of the volunteers were the government leaders, Muggle or otherwise. He suspected that this was not because they did not wish to be saved, but because they knew a mean-spirited ruse when they heard one.

"I will choose one of you to spare from the ensuing chaos," Judith announced gleefully, glancing around. "Whoever I choose will not be killed by the Morrigan Web. Neither will they be killed in the massacre that follows. Yes," she nodded, glancing back at the world leaders behind her, "yes, that part is true, I fear. None of you will leave this room alive. But still, one of you will not have to endure it." She cocked her head

coily. "Because one of you... I shall kill right now." She smiled. "Won't that be fun?"

"James," Lily whispered faintly, clinging to his arm.

"A volunteer!" Judith cried, whirling toward Lily. "And a Potter, no less! How poignant. The Boy Who Lived grows up to become the father of--" she flung out her hand, transforming it into a writhing, coiling tentacle, "the Girl Who Died!"

She cackled as the tentacle flew through the air, converging on Lily. James flung his sister behind him, crying out in mingled desperation and rage, forcing himself between her and the icy coil of the Lady of the Lake.

I'm about to die... he thought, squeezing his eyes shut, and the last thing I heard my dad say is that he's proud of me...

Instead of a spear of deadly ice, however, a splash of tepid water struck James, dousing him where he stood.

He opened his eyes. Judith stood before him, her arm extended, but ending in a dripping, faltering stump. She raised her dissolving arm and regarded it with complete, naked surprise. Turning her attention back to James, she narrowed her eyes and flung out her arm again. It extended, snaking, trailing streams of dripping water, and then dissolved away, crashing to the floor with a wet, resounding *splat*.

"What..." she breathed, her voice shaking with confusion, "what is this...? How can this...?"

She tried again, using both arms. The result was the same, only now her arms dissolved up to the shoulders. She boggled down at them, her mouth falling open.

Suddenly, she whirled around, turning her attention to the gigantic ball of ice that formed Petra's prison, as if she fully expected it to be shattered into pieces, Petra standing free, teasing her with a knowing grin. Seeing the ice-cocoon intact, however, Judith slumped, regrowing her arms somewhat sloppily. Softly, helplessly, she began to giggle.

James watched this with growing confusion. Lily climbed to her feet behind him, clinging to him and peering around his shoulder.

Judith's giggles increased, growing into hard, breathless gusts of laughter. And then, seamlessly, the laughter transformed into wracking sobs. She spun around again, and her eyes were wide, wild, bulging in her face, dead as marbles.

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“Where!” she rasped, still giggling and sobbing uncontrollably. “I hear you! I know you’re back there! NOW!”

She flailed, streaming her arms out into tentacles again. They whipped across the hall this time, fluid and spastic, aiming for nothing. Judith cackled, gasped, and suddenly, horribly, let out a blood-curdling, rafter-quaking scream.

Rechtor Grudje was blasted aside by one of the tentacles. Seeing this, the remainder of the crowd panicked. People began dashing in every direction, trying to avoid Judith’s blindly writhing appendages. The student ambassadors scrambled behind their platform, screaming in terror. Judith stumbled around the centre of the floor, her head thrown back, her hair falling from its bun, her mouth screaming, cackling, sobbing, babbling nonsense beneath wide, utterly haunted eyes.

“What’s wrong with her!?” Lily cried, her voice so high it was barely audible.

James glanced behind him, to his sister’s frightened face, and then lower. Rose still lay crumpled against the wall, Marshall Parris’ tie still compressed to her shoulder by Ralph’s big hands. She glanced up at James with her eyes, then down, at the blue purse abandoned on the floor next to her. It was clearly empty. But in the shadows of its open mouth, James spied the unmistakable dregs of dried vines, broken leaf dust, and a single spiny bur.

The Yuxa Baslatma plants! The ones that had come back from Durmstrang, tangled variously into Rose’s robes! *That’s* what she had stopped in her dormitory room for! *That’s* what she had been doing hunkered down beneath the easels when they had first arrived. Rose-- who had at first refused to believe in the very existence of the Lady of the Lake-- had in the end spied her best weakness: *she travels by water.*

Rose had poisoned that water, filling it with twenty dreams’ worth of Dream Inducers.

And now, eleven minutes after her arrival, every shred of those forced hallucinations was daggering into Judith’s waking mind, driving her utterly, uncontrollably insane.

Unfortunately, Judith’s insanity was propelling her into a dangerous, deadly rampage. She seemed to be growing in size, bulging, her shape rippling as it transformed into sloshing liquid, losing the ability to maintain form. She struck out in all directions, screaming, cackling, her hair flying wild and her eyes rolled up so that only the whites showed.

Her tentacle arms divided into pairs, and then split again, forming an octopoid flail of thrashing tendrils, striking randomly into the scattering crowd. James watched helplessly as the horrible watery shape ravaged the Hall, terrorizing its fleeing occupants. Over her head, the Clock ticked on. There were barely three minutes left.

Judith screamed again, so loudly and violently that it shook the floor. With an apparent force of will, she withdrew her tentacles and clapped her hands to her head, as if trying to force her mad thoughts into some semblance of order. When she opened her eyes again, they glowed blue, shockingly bright. Her mouth cinched down in a frown of intense concentration. She cast around, spied James, Rose, Ralph and Lily, and *hissed*, distending her jaw into a horrible, cat-like maw. Her arms exploded into tentacles again, and all eight of them streamed forward, tipped with ragged, icy claws.

A lithe pink shape struck Judith in the chest like an arrow, spoiling her aim and knocking her aside. The icy claws struck the stone floor and shattered into shards. The pink shape-- a lissom, coiling snake over ten feet long-- buried itself in Judith's semi-liquid chest and burst out of her back, opening its own jaws in a vicious hiss. Judith stared down at the whipping pink tail protruding from her chest and began to giggle uncontrollably, her sense of lucidity lost once again, overwhelmed by the insanity visions of her waking-dreams. She grabbed the pink tail and yanked it. The snake withdrew from her chest violently, along with an explosion of horrible, black water.

"Nastasia," Rose said faintly, somehow audible over the din of screams and chaos, "she came back..."

"Part of her," James nodded, stunned with amazement.

In the centre of the Hall floor, the engorged, disintegrating figure of Judith continued to wrestle with Nastasia's writhing, pink snake, just as they had months ago in the midnight corridors. If not for Judith's weakened, insane state, she might have overwhelmed Nastasia. As it was, the battle was surprisingly evenly matched. Finally, with a roar of fury, Judith completely fell apart. The disincorporated torrent of her body streamed across the floor, wailing with inhuman rage, and boiled down a grate, escaping into the sewers deep below. The pink snake thrashed after her, using its jaws to rip the grate from its socket and slithering swiftly down the hole beneath, intent on pursuit.

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The Hall seemed suddenly, unnaturally quiet. Titus Hardcastle moaned and stirred from the debris of the broken table. Broken candles lay across the stone floor like bits of chalk, some with their flames still flickering and guttering. The remains of the Fountain of Magical Brethren lay before the dais, glinting amongst the debris of broken tables and their scattered, shattered contents.

Suddenly, a loud, splintering crack echoed around the Hall. James turned toward the sound to see Petra's icy prison suddenly laced with thick white fissures, expanding as he watched, crackling faintly. An instant later, the ice cocoon shattered, spraying chunks of ice across the stone floor in all directions. Where it had once stood, her hair and clothing crusted with ice, Petra climbed stiffly to her feet.

James ran to join her.

"How's Rose," Petra gasped, her voice hoarse.

"She's... I don't know!" James answered frantically. "Ralph's helping her, I think. Your detective friend as well."

Stiffly, Petra turned her head toward Rose and seemed to concentrate on her. After a moment, she said, "She'll be all right. For now, at least."

James nodded his understanding. Petra had stabilized Rose's injury somehow. It was just one of those sorceress things she knew how to do.

Petra glanced at the double doors at the rear of the hall. Another splintering crack echoed around the hall and the doors shuddered.

"Go," she said dully, nodding toward the doors. "They're unsealed. Get everyone out of here."

Lucinda Lyon gave the doors a hard pull. With a grind of ice, they wrenched partway open. People began to mill forward, forming a panicked bottleneck in their hurry to escape.

"Petra!" James exclaimed, grabbing Petra's shoulders. "It's too late! The Clock! It's going to go off in barely a minute! We can't empty the Hall in time! We have to stop the Morrigan Web!"

"It *can't* be stopped," Petra sighed deeply, hopelessly. "We can't move it. We can't take the cane out of it. Judith won."

James shook his head in desperate impatience. "It *can* be stopped! We just have to switch out the thing inside it! If only we can find something just as powerful as Magnussen's cane, and connected to him somehow, but good!"

Petra laughed hollowly, shaking her head. “Oh, is that all?” She pushed him weakly toward the doors. “Go on, James. Escape if you can. I’m too drained to help. If we were in the city, it might be different. But out here...” she shrugged and stumbled. James grabbed her, threw an arm around her to support her.

Ralph’s voice called over the clamouring crowd. “James! What about your dream!” he said, craning to look back at James over his shoulder even as he continued to compress Rose’s wound. “It was supposed to be the answer to our most vexing question! This has got to be it, hasn’t it? How to stop the Morrigan Web! What to replace it with! Think back on your dream!”

James shook his head in frustration. “I can’t! There’s no time!” He glanced up at the Clock again. The minute hand ticked forward, edging toward the number twelve. There was less than a minute left. And then, as he stared at the Clock, something Marshall Parris had said flitted into his mind--

Saw enough injury reports at the old man’s law office to learn a few things...

“*Quinn wins*,” James whispered, his eyes widening. He glanced back toward Ralph. Marshall Parris was still squatted next to him, supporting Rose with one arm behind her shoulders. “Hey Mr. Parris,” James called, “Tell me, does the phrase ‘Quinn wins’ mean anything to you?”

Parris blinked at him in confused surprise. “How...?” he began, then cocked his head and frowned. “It was my old man’s slogan. Not my dad, but the guy whose house I grew up in. He had it on billboards all over town, advertising his law firm. ‘Quinn wins’. Stupid but catchy. But... how could you know that?”

“Because,” James said, hopping with excitement, “it’s the answer to our most vexing question!”

Petra shook her head in confusion. “What are you talking about, James?”

“The alley where his mother was killed,” James said quickly, replaying the dream in his head. “She had the gun-- the gun that killed Professor Magnussen all those years earlier! The same gun *you* had,” James declared, his voice rising as he turned back to Parris, “when you ran into her killer, years later! It saved you then! It’s... it’s sort of a good luck charm, isn’t it? It keeps you safe! That’s why you’re such a good

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detective, even in the wizarding world! The gun that killed Magnussen took his power, just like a wand would!”

Petra straightened and tilted her head at Parris. “The talisman,” she said wonderingly, almost laughingly, “is that ancient *pistol* of yours? Seriously?”

Parris rolled his eyes. Gently, he disengaged from Rose and stood up. He reached into his trench coat and produced a very old, grimy pistol. James recognized it immediately.

“That’s it!” he cried, dashing toward the detective, his hand out. “It’s the key to stopping the Morrigan Web! It’s as powerful as the cane--*more* powerful, because it defeated it! And it’s connected to Magnussen in the most important way of all! It ended him!”

“Hold on, skippy,” Parris said, withholding the ancient weapon from James’ reaching hand. “I don’t know who you are, and I sure don’t know what you’re talking about. This thing belonged to my mother. It’s important to me, and it’s dangerous. Just because you know the slogan for my old man’s billboards, I’m not about to just hand it over to you--”

“Give it to him, Parris,” Petra said.

“No chance, doll,” Parris replied firmly.

Petra sighed impatiently. “I’ll pay you one thousand galleons for it.”

“Here ya go, kid,” Parris nodded, dropping the old weapon into James’ open hand.

Behind them, obliviously, people mobbed at the partly open doors, pushing through with horrible sluggishness.

“Petra!” James exclaimed, holding the weapon awkwardly by the handle. He’d never handled such a thing before. “Lift me up!”

Petra nodded. She closed her eyes and extended a hand toward James. Instantly, he felt gravity fall away, releasing him into the air. Gently, he lofted over the broken statues, the decimated fountain, and into the icy chill of the frosted rose window. The ugly five-faced clock hung before him, its guts ratcheting faintly, pushing the minute hand inexorably, gradually forward. Hovering before it, James studied the clock, looking for any hidden compartment or alcove.

There were only seconds left.

Desperately, James reached forward and grabbed the gigantic central white face with his free hand. He tugged at it, meaning to wrench the face off completely. With a brief screech, however, the face hinged

open, swinging like a door and revealing the Clock's ticking, gear-choked innards.

A small compartment occupied the lower third. Inside it, glinting wickedly, was the familiar gargoyle-faced cane head.

"Don't just grab it out!" Rose called, struggling to raise her voice over the clambering crowd. "*Switch* them, James!"

Ralph added, "But be quick about it!"

James held the old pistol next to the glinting cane, bringing them as close together as he could. Like opposing magnets, they seemed to resist each other. James steeled himself, wrapped his free hand around the cane (which was hot to the touch, as if it had been sitting for months in blazing desert sun) and held his breath.

He tugged. The cane didn't want to move. He tugged harder, straining and pushing the pistol forward, trying to force them to switch places. It wasn't working. Something forced them apart, a sort of tiny but undeniable gravity, a force field of destiny, insisting that what was meant to happen *had* to happen.

And then, suddenly, the force field broke. The cane flew from the compartment at the precise moment that the pistol slammed into it. James recoiled backward, cane in hand, caught in mid-air by Petra's careful levitation.

The clock struck the hour. Brilliant light exploded from it, blinding James. He shielded his eyes and cringed away. Tendrils of magic arced from the clock, white-gold in the expanse of the Hall. The tendrils connected like lightning to every wizard and witch in the hall-- Titus Hardcastle, who had finally regained his feet, along with the other Aurors; Lily and the other student ambassadors; every diplomat and Ministry official in the clamouring crowd-- all were suddenly connected in a sparkling, flashing Web of magical energy. The Web's intensity built, became blinding, and then, with an explosive crescendo of perfect finality, burst into a mass of inexplicable red, purple and yellow shapes, filling the Hall entirely.

James felt himself lowered suddenly to the floor, clumsily, as Petra glanced around, her eyes wild, worried, examining the fluttering, colourful cloud. A scent filled the Hall, soft but pervasive, smelling incongruously of spring breezes and sunlight. It was, in fact, the unmistakable perfume of spring flowers, and with it, James recognized the fluttering veil of objects. They were petals, descending like confetti,

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covering the floor, the broken tables, the smashed statues, and every person in the Hall, transforming the chaotic scene into a softly magical wonderland.

Every eye in the room cast about in stunned silence, watching the gentle snowfall of colour.

Slowly, cautiously, Petra relaxed. She turned to look back at James over her shoulder, a fragile smile rising on her face like a sunrise.

James returned the smile. Helplessly, he fell to a seat on the floor, releasing the ugly cane head, weak with relief.

Behind him, suddenly, the door beneath the Rose window shuddered. Something banged against it from the inside, then blasted it open. From his seat on the floor, covered with fluttering petals and smelling of summer rose gardens, James turned. His father, uncle and aunt burst through the antechamber door, wands raised alertly, shoulders hunched for battle. Spying the gently falling curtain of petals, they stopped, looks of comical confusion dawning on their faces.

Harry spotted his son seated amidst a drift of flower petals and lowered his wand.

“James,” he asked, his voice strained with wonder and confusion, “What... exactly... did we *miss*?”





25. THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

The moment the crowd of ambassadors, diplomats and government officials drained from the Hall, carefully guarded by the Aurors, Albus and Scorpius appeared, as well as Zane and, unexpectedly, Professor Flitwick.

“Whoa,” Zane said, his eyes going wide as he pushed through the double doors and spied the destruction and bizarre floral decoration of the room. “This must have been some party!”

“Albus,” Harry called his son, beckoning him forward urgently. “Help us! Rose has been hurt!”

Both Albus and Scorpius dashed forward, converging on Rose as Hermione and Ron bent over her.

“It’s not as bad as it looks, Mum, really,” Rose winced as they pulled her to her feet. “Petra helped me. She’s good at that sort of thing, apparently.”

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“Shush” Hermione commanded, supporting her daughter on one side while her husband supported her on the other. “This is all your fault!” she exclaimed, glancing up at Ron. “She gets all her mischief from your side of the family!”

“Mum,” Rose managed to roll her eyes.

“No,” Ron shook his head, “it’s true, love. And despite what your mum says, she wouldn’t have it any other way. You’ll tell us everything that happened on the way to hospital wing, right?”

“There are others,” Harry said, meeting Albus and Scorpius and pointing toward the petal-covered debris of broken tables and statuary. “None hurt as bad as Rose, but they’ll need some help getting to the hospital wing. You’ll take them, won’t you?”

“Aww, dad!” Albus complained, “I want to hear the story! I mean, *look* at this place! And you should have heard the noise!”

“Believe me, I did,” Harry nodded curtly. “And you’ll hear the story just as soon as I do. For now, you and Scorpius, I officially classify you junior Aurors, first class.”

“What? Sincerely?” Albus brightened. “Wait, does that mean...” he glanced back toward the double doors, where Titus Hardcastle was conversing with Lucinda Lyon, their heads close together. “You know... you’re, like, back in charge again?”

“Provisionally,” Harry nodded. “I’ve only spoken briefly to the Minister-- he seems to have spent a large portion of the evening under a table-- but he formally dismissed the charges against your aunt, uncle and me in light of the evening’s events. There’ll be a hearing before the Wizengamot, but I don’t expect to have any trouble with it after...” he glanced around the room and gestured vaguely, “all of this. Now off with you. Duty calls.”

“Yes sir!” Albus saluted and dashed off, followed closely by Scorpius. Watching from nearby, still dazed at the evening’s events, James could see that Scorpius was pleased with his temporary deputation, even if he didn’t like to show it. Together, the boys began to lead limping and confused diplomats from the room, grilling them loudly about what had happened.

“*I* wanted to be a junior Auror,” Zane sighed, plopping next to James in the drift of petals.

James glanced aside at his friend. “So what brought you here?”

Zane shrugged. "Nastasia left me a note. Said she was coming here tonight and that I would never see her again. She said not to follow her because she didn't want me to get hurt."

"So you followed her," James nodded.

"Immediately. The Alma Aleron cabinet was in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, lying on its back," Zane said, cocking his head curiously. "I mean, what's up with that? I had to crawl out of it like Dracula waking up from a nap."

"Oh," James said, "that was Ralph. He knocked it over."

"Sounds like Ralph," Zane agreed equably. "What about the Beauxbatons cabinet? Don't tell me *that* was his work, too?"

"Why?" James asked, his curiosity piqued. "What was wrong with it?"

Zane gave a low whistle. "Smashed all to bits. Looked like somebody had taken a sledgehammer to it."

"You're probably not far off," James nodded, thinking back to the Collector's unnatural, rage-fuelled strength. "So have you seen Nastasia, then?"

"No," Zane slumped. "You?"

James shrugged noncommittally. "Here and there. It's... complicated."

Zane gave a deep sigh. "I know. She's trouble. I'm sorry for the way I acted about it all. She weaves quite a spell, doesn't she?"

James nodded again. "Petra was here," he commented, changing the subject.

"She was?" Zane exclaimed, sitting up. "Where'd she go?"

"Gone again," James admitted, making a flying away gesture with one hand. "She and that detective bloke. Marshall Parris. Said she'll be back, though, once she sees him back to his home in the states and pays him. She's bringing Izzy back with her when she comes."

"Cool," Zane relaxed.

Ralph approached, his hands still tacky with Rose's blood. "Come on, you two," he said, cocking a thumb over his shoulder. "You're dad's looking for some explanations, James." The big boy smiled down at Zane. "By the way, good to see you, mate!"

Zane squinted up at Ralph, meeting his smile. "You too, Ralphinator. Just like old times, eh?"

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Ralph glanced around at the ruined Hall and nodded. “Yeah, I’d say pretty much *exactly* like old times. Shame you missed all the action.”

“Hey,” Zane said, climbing to his feet, his smile turning into a grin, “the night’s still young!”

Ralph and Zane each took one of James’ hands and tugged him to his feet. Together the three picked their way over to where Harry Potter stood talking to Professor Flitwick.

“The Professor here has given this curious object a quick examination,” Harry said, holding up Magnussen’s broken cane head. “Suffice it to say, it’s nothing but a worthless hunk of iron, now. Whatever you did to it, James, you broke its powers.”

“Ooo!” Zane exclaimed, his eyes brightening. “Can I have it then? It’d make a great addition to my dorm room! Give it that dark and brooding look that it’s been missing for the last year or so!”

“I think not,” Harry said with a half-smile, handing the cane back to Flitwick. “We’ll be destroying it, just to be sure. But now,” he glanced from Ralph to James. “You two, it seems, have a tale to tell...”

He invited the boys to join him on the dais, beneath the row of still-standing headmaster portraits (who, apart from the non-moving Merlinus Ambrosius, watched with great interest). James didn’t want to describe the events of the night-- he felt weary to the bone and slightly punch-drunk-- but his father gently insisted, reminding them that their memories of events would be less clear even by tomorrow morning. Thus, with Ralph’s help, they told the entire tale.

When it was over, Harry shook his head in wonder. “I can’t believe it...” he mused darkly from his seat beneath the portraits.

“What?” James prodded, “that we tossed the whole universe around like a quaffle? Or that Rose poisoned Judith’s mind with the Yuxa Baslatma plants?” He perked up, warming to the topic, “Or that I figured out the key to defeating the Morrigan Web with just a few seconds to spare?”

His father shook his head wryly. “No. I can’t believe you didn’t trust Tabitha enough to stop us from falling for the fake object. We destroyed the Vassar’s Crystal Chalice for nothing...” His voice was scolding, but James could see that he was suppressing a smile.

“Yeah,” James nodded, giving his father a shove. “Well *you* said you wouldn’t use wands with the Morrigan Web about to go off! ‘Oh, we’ll all leave them at home just to be safe!’ Big liar!”

“It wasn’t a lie,” Harry said, rising to his feet. “It was a last minute change of plan.” He stretched his back and peered aside, at the portrait of Merlinus Ambrosius. Addressing Flitwick, he asked, “No luck bringing it to life, Professor?”

Flitwick came alongside and heaved a shallow sigh. “None at all, I’m afraid. And with his death almost exactly one year gone, I have little hope of ever finding success.”

“You’ve tried everything?” Harry frowned curiously at the portrait.

“Well,” Flitwick hedged, “everything within my power. The final option is unavailable to me, of course. A touch from the deceased’s wand sometimes imparts the final spark of life. Unfortunately, Headmaster Merlinus left his staff buried immovably in New Amsterdam.”

Harry continued to frown at the portrait, his face etched in deep thought. Suddenly, he glanced aside at Ralph. “Your wand,” he said, “you never told the Professor that it’s...?”

Ralph shuffled his feet uncomfortably. “No. I... don’t tell a lot of people where I got it from. It’s almost better that they think it’s got a yeti whisker in it. Hard enough to get people to practice duelling with me as it is...”

Flitwick watched this exchange with mounting interest. “Well,” he chimed in, “now my curiosity is most definitely piqued! What are you talking about? Where did you get your wand, Mr. Deedle? Do tell!”

“It might be best just to show you,” Ralph sighed.

“Titus,” Harry called suddenly, raising his chin. “A moment...”

James glanced back as Titus Hardcastle limped toward them, threading carefully through the detritus of the Great Hall, his feet kicking up puffs of petals. “What is it, Harry?”

“You still have Ralph’s wand with you, yes?” Harry answered.

Hardcastle nodded as he approached. He reached into the depths of his robes and withdrew the oversized wand. He looked at it in his big hand for a moment, then, sighing, handed it over to Ralph.

“What you did,” Hardcastle said, his voice low and rumbling, “I called it foolish. But I was wrong. I was wrong about quite a lot.”

“You were doing your job, Titus,” Harry said coolly. “No one can fault you for that.”

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“They can and they should,” Hardcastle said, his voice becoming a growl of self-recrimination. “I followed orders, yeah. I thought that was my duty. Now...”

Harry regarded his long-time partner seriously. James knew there was very little anyone could say. Titus had betrayed a trust in the name of duty. The two men would probably be able to work it out in time. For now, however...

Harry opened his mouth to respond, but the words never came. Instead, a bolt of red exploded against Hardcastle’s back. His hands jerked spasmodically, scrabbling for his wand, but the Stunning spell did its work. Like a tree falling in the forest, Hardcastle keeled forward. Harry lunged to catch him, throwing a shoulder under Hardcastle’s chest.

Another red bolt struck Professor Flitwick, causing him to stumble and the ugly cane’s head to drop from his hand with a clatter. “Oh dear,” he said faintly, and fell to the floor.

James, Zane and Ralph scrambled, their eyes scanning the seemingly empty Great Hall for some sign of the attacker, but there was no one in sight.

Harry lowered Hardcastle to the dais as gently as he could. “Behind me!” he ordered, scrambling for his wand. Once it was in his hand, however, he let out a startled grunt. The wand popped out of his fist, floating in mid-air. A moment later, Harry’s head jerked back as if kicked. He fell back onto Titus Hardcastle, raising a hand to cup his jaw.

A dry, rattling laugh came out of empty air right in front of James. He recognized it immediately and his eyes flew wide.

“I have to hand it to you, James,” the laughing voice said, “you were right about my dear partner Judith. She could not be trusted. Fortunately, she went insane, chased away to who knows where. But I am still here, and this presents me with a bit of a problem. Fortunately, James Potter, *my* problems...” There was a flourish of suddenly visible fabric and Rechter Grudje stood before him, Harry Potter’s wand in one hand, his own wand and the invisibility cloak in the other. “Are *your* problems.” He favoured James with a thin, angry smile.

“Headmaster Grudje,” Harry said, climbing carefully to his feet, making no sudden movements. “We assumed you had vacated along with the others. There is a squad of Aurors seeking you at this very moment, in fact, all of them quite curious to speak to you.”

“Yes,” Grudje nodded, “and this is the crux of my problem. You see, the entire school has been locked down. The Floo network is being monitored vigilantly. Every entrance is shut and guarded. No matter what guise I take, I will not be allowed to leave the premises. And it is integral that I do so. You see, I’ve no intention to go to Azkaban. That’s why I returned to my office, procuring this very useful object,” he shook the cloak in his hand, “A gift, helpfully abandoned in my alter-ego’s office at Durmstrang. With its help, you four are going to escort me from these premises. I shall be hidden beneath, and you shall insure that all of the necessary doors are opened, allowing me to pass...”

Zane piped up, “And why are we going to do that, Headmaster, er...” He cocked his head and frowned. “Sorry, forgot your name already. I’m Zane Walker, by the way. I don’t go to Hogwarts anymore. American. Nice to meet you and all that...” He stuck out his hand as if he expected Grudje to shake it.

Grudje levelled his wand instead. “I really only *need* the elder Potter,” he said threateningly. “The rest of you I have no qualms about killing right now. What shall it be, Harry Potter, Mr. Head Auror? Assist me? Or do I start uttering curses?”

“No, Ralph!” Harry commanded suddenly, his eyes darting to the side. Ralph, James saw, had been surreptitiously drawing out his wand. Harry went on urgently, “The Headmaster is quite serious. He will kill to get his way. Don’t do anything foolish. Give it to me, Ralph...”

Ralph looked at Harry in surprise, frozen in the act of withdrawing his wand.

“Mr. Potter speaks wisely,” Grudje said. “Obey your elders, boy. Pass the wand over to me before anyone else wanders into the Hall and becomes an unwitting hostage...” He stowed Harry’s wand into an inner pocket, flung the invisibility cloak over his shoulder, and held out his free hand, palm up, still threatening them with his own wand.

Reluctantly, Ralph passed his wand to Harry. Harry took it carefully.

“To me, Mr. Potter,” Grudje commanded in a low voice. “Slowly...”

Harry sighed deeply and turned. Still making no sudden movements, he held the wand out, extending it slowly toward Grudje’s reaching hand. Just as the headmaster made to grab it, however, Harry

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pivoted, turning the wand away and touching it, with a dull *thunk*, to the unmoving canvas of Merlin's portrait.

There was no response.

"What are you doing?" Grudje demanded, growing impatient and angry. "Give me the wand! Give it to me or your son dies first!"

In answer to this, a tiny noise emanated from the portrait. Every eye turned toward it. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the portrait had ripped. The tear emanated from the tip of Ralph's wand and stretched upward, crossing over the front of painted Merlin's chest, slashing his face, and stopping just past the top of his head. It looked, more than anything, as if the canvas had been stretched too tight and the pressure of the wand had caused it to split.

James' heart sank. Whatever his father had done, it hadn't made matters better.

"The *wand!*" Grudje ordered, raising his own wand to James' face. James cringed back.

"Here," Harry said, taking the wand away from the torn portrait and handing it over, his face grim.

Grudje reached for it.

Suddenly, soundlessly, light pierced the torn painting. Grudje startled so abruptly that he jumped back, leaving the wand in Harry's hand. James peered around his father's shoulder at the Merlin portrait. Inexplicably, the tear glowed like a bolt of lightning, sending out living, shifting beams of light. The rip widened, tearing the canvas further. The frame creaked and popped, its corners beginning to separate as the canvas bulged.

"Back away," Harry muttered, not taking his eyes from the splitting portrait, but pushing James, Ralph and Zane behind him, manoeuvring them away slowly, carefully.

Across from them, Grudje's face was frozen in a pained rictus, his lips pulled into a tight frown, his brow lowered over bulging, tense eyes. His wand was still raised in his hand, only now, slowly, he turned it toward the brightly glowing, splitting portrait.

The frame snapped and broke. The portrait fell forward, flipped off its easel, and dropped to the floor face up, so that the beams of light from its ruptured canvas cut straight up into the air, making the rest of the Great Hall seem positively dark by comparison. And still the rift widened, creaking, tearing the canvas apart with a soft, purring, ripping

noise. A sound emanated from the lightning bolt-shaped rift. It was like wind, or like distant voices, echoing, indecipherable, blowing and overlapping and teasing at meaning. James found himself leaning forward to hear, to understand...

“Stop,” his father said, softly but sternly. “I’ve heard that before...”

The portrait exploded apart. Bits of canvas and broken frame spun from the dais. But the glowing rift remained, bigger now, as if freed from its boundary. Light speared toward the Great Hall’s dark, enchanted ceiling. James squinted into it, sure there was something moving inside that light-- a thin shadowy shape, growing wider, darker, more substantial, like a figure walking out of some brilliant, blindingly hot furnace. The haunting, whispering voices grew clearer, louder...

Grudje levelled his wand at the piercing beam of light. He was backing away from it, slowly, warily, his face a mask of restrained terror. *What is he so afraid of? James thought. It’s not frightening... if anything... it’s beautiful...*

Finally, with a blare of golden fire and a rush of gathering voices, a figure emerged from the light. The rift collapsed behind it, closing and vanishing with a sound of roaring wind.

James felt eerily ready for what he saw. It was as if he had been expecting something like this-- pining for it so deeply and so secretly that he’d not even been consciously aware of it. Only now, as it happened, did he realize that it was a fulfilment of his unspoken hopes.

“Merli-- !” he began, and then stopped suddenly, his breath catching in his throat.

The figure that resolved out of the blinding light, now standing before him as real as he himself, resplendent in a conical hat and rich purple robes, was *not* Merlinus Ambrosius. It was an old man with flowing white beard, a thin, kindly face with a long, crooked nose, and wearing, over his bright blue eyes, a pair of half-moon spectacles. The old man turned resolutely to Grudje, as if he’d been looking for him.

Grudje’s face paled so quickly and completely that he appeared to transform into a ghost before James’ eyes. His wand was still held out before him, but it trembled so violently that he could barely hold onto it. He seemed to have completely stopped breathing. He did not fire-- seemed suddenly completely incapable of firing.

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The old man with the flowing white beard regarded him sadly. “Nephew,” he said.

And Grudje ran. He leapt from the dais, stumbled in panic, and, righting himself, bolted toward the doors, leaving a trail of disturbed flower petals scattering in his wake.

“*Accio wand!*” Harry called, flicking Ralph’s wand at the retreating figure.

Grudje stumbled again, turning on the spot as Harry’s wand ripped from his robes, spiralling away through the air. Grudje barely seemed to notice. He pivoted back, ran into the door desperately, and clambered through.

The old man on the stage turned and glanced over at Zane, Ralph, and James, finally raising his kindly blue eyes to Harry Potter, who deftly caught his wand. He smiled and his eyes twinkled behind his half-moon spectacles. A moment later, with a loud *CRACK*, he vanished.

“After him!” Harry exclaimed, tossing Ralph his wand, leaping down from the dais and running toward the Hall doors. “Grudje can’t be allowed to escape or obtain any more hostages!”

“That was...!” James cried faintly, scrambling to follow his father, his mind spinning so fast he could barely keep up with it. “That was...! Was that...?”

“What?” Zane asked frantically, running to keep up and pushing Ralph ahead of him. “Who? What’d I miss? Who’s the oldster with the specs?”

“It can’t be who it looked like it was...” Harry said as he ran, shoving through the double doors in pursuit of Grudje. “But it was. I’d know that face anywhere. That...” he said, shaking his head in dark wonder, “was Albus Dumbledore.”



James followed his dad up the staircase at a dead run. “Where do you think he was going?” he called up to him.

“There!” Harry exclaimed, pointing to the top of the stairs.

James craned to look as he ran. A robed figure was just dashing around the upper banister, shoving aside a gathering of students as he went.

“Stop him!” Harry called, his voice echoing sternly up the stairs.

“But--” Cameron Creevey stammered, pointing after the fleeing figure. “But, that was the Headmaster...!”

Harry rounded the bannister and blew past Cameron, who turned to watch him pass. “And that was Harry Potter!” he added excitedly.

James and Zane followed, with Ralph panting in the rear.

“What’s going on, mates?” Cameron called, cupping his hands to his mouth and hopping on his toes. “Another adventure? Can I come?”

Harry pelted, swerving around knots of students. James had seen his father in Auror mode before, but never like this. He barely seemed to be breathing as he ran, his hands flattened into blades, scissoring the air, his feet seeming to cross acres with each swift step. He was pulling away from James even as James ran flat out to keep up with him.

Grudje ran ahead, his robes flying wildly, shoving students out of his way angrily, gasping with unbridled panic. And yet, James felt sure, the headmaster was not running from them. He was running from the figure that had appeared on the dais-- the completely inexplicable form of Albus Dumbledore.

They turned one corner, then another. Finally, Grudje passed the gargoyle that guarded the spiral stairs to the headmaster’s office. The gargoyle straightened to block Harry, but Harry flashed his wand, firing a bolt of purple at the ceiling.

“Official Auror business!” he called, jerking his head toward the glowing purple spell above him.

James glanced up. Printed on the ceiling in illuminated purple letters was his father’s name, the seal of the Ministry of Magic, the Minister’s signature, the symbol of the Auror department (two wands crossed over an all-seeing eye) and the words HEAD AUROR.

The gargoyle immediately stepped aside. As James bolted past, following in his father’s wake, he was certain he heard the gargoyle mutter, “go get him.”

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The spiral stairs clanked with the pounding of four sets of footsteps. Harry reached the outer chamber first, his wand still out, steady as stone, his head lowered behind it. The door to the headmaster's office was wide open, emitting a bar of golden light onto the stone floor.

"Stay behind me," Harry growled, slowing. "And Ralph, keep that wand of yours at the ready."

Behind James, panting and sweating freely, Ralph nodded. He levelled his wand before him.

Harry peered around the edge of the office door, inching his face into the yellow light that glowed from within. He paused. After a moment, he glanced back at James, Ralph and Zane and lowered his wand. The expression on his face was strange, unreadable. Was he happy? Upset? He nodded toward the door, beckoning the boys inside. They approached and followed him into the golden light.

The first thing James noticed was a figure collapsed against the wall just inside the door. It was huddled, panting harshly, its hands scabbled over its face and its knees drawn up to its chest. It took James several seconds to realize that it was Rechter Grudje. Only it wasn't. As James watched, the figure melted into the shape of Avior Dorchascathan, his breath whistling in his chest, his eyes wild between his fingers. A moment later, it was the Collector, his face sheened with sweat, his hair standing up in terrified spikes.

"Terrible, I know," a soft voice announced. "But he is nothing to be afraid of. Not anymore. Do come inside. We have very little time."

James turned toward the voice. Albus Dumbledore stood before the headmaster's desk, tall, thin and exuding a sort of grandfatherly warmth. His eyes sparkled benignly, but sadly. As James crept slowly into the room, approaching the revered headmaster, he realized that he had been wrong about Professor Avior. He was not this man's twin-- he was barely a pale replica. The missing element was not in his physical appearance, but in the warmth, the restrained grandeur, the sense of laughter hidden just behind the eyes, even in sadness. Without those things, Avior was merely a grey shadow, devoid of life.

Gradually, James noticed that the office itself looked different than he'd ever seen it before. Grudje's cold gloom had been replaced with golden light and subtle motion. Fire crackled happily in the hearth. Golden gizmos and clockwork wonders ticked and spun on small tables all around. Surrounding this, tall bookshelves lined the room, filled with

curiosities, clocks, statues, and books, books, so many books, all bound with sumptuous cloth, or rich velvet, or somber leather, and all promising a lifetime of incredible adventures, tall tales, and dark mysteries. For James had the undeniable sense that this man, this Albus Dumbledore, did not only hoard textbooks. There was something of the child in him, not diminished by age, but tempered by it, made perfect, brimming with curiosity, yearning for adventure.

A huge, glorious bird preened on a perch next to the headmaster's desk. Its plumage was brilliant crimson, edged with deepest gold. By comparison, the Jiskra seemed a mere winged lizard, no more dangerous than it was regal.

The strangest bit of all was the tall, rectangular mirror erected near the fire. James recognized it immediately, as did his father by the way he looked askance at it. The Mirror of Erised glistened darkly, its glass face obscured by shifting, silvery clouds.

Slowly, Harry led the three boys into the room, not taking his eyes from the wizard that stood before him. When he joined Dumbledore in the pool of golden light cast by the desk's many candles, he finally spoke.

"Headmaster," he said, his voice just above a whisper. "How are you here?"

Dumbledore did not immediately answer the question. He merely smiled at Harry, regarding him with keen, fatherly interest. "You've grown up into a fine, fine man, Harry," he said. "I knew you would. I am glad to witness it myself, if briefly."

James looked up at his father. The elder Potter shook his head slowly, wonderingly, and yet, there was something darkening his face. Was it pain? Sadness? Confusion? Certainly confusion. James was feeling plenty of that himself.

"You can't be here," Harry said simply.

"I can, apparently," Dumbledore said, bowing his head slightly. "It's very unusual, but not impossible. Circumstances have allowed me a brief moment-- a second chance, as it were-- to undo something I was unable to undo during my lifetime. A tragic error. A lifelong regret."

"Grudje," James nodded, turning to glance back at the pathetic figure cowering near the door.

"Alas," Dumbledore said sadly, "that is not his name. Nor is his name Avior Dorchascathan, even if it is the name given by those who

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raised him. He might best be known by his most recent alias, for a Collector is what he is. He collects faces, you see, trading them for the one he never knew. The one that should have been his from birth.”

Harry shook his head, frowning. “I don’t understand. What’s Rechter Grudje have to do with any of this...?”

“I’ll explain it all later, dad,” James sighed. “It’s kind of a long story.”

Dumbledore lowered his gaze to James, offered him a small smile. “I am pleased to meet you, young Mr. Potter. You are not unlike your father in many ways. And there is a hint even of your grandfather in you. The woman, Judith, did not lie when she told you that.”

James shook his head. “Thanks. But I’m not like him at all. He was a Marauder.”

“He was much more than a Marauder,” Dumbledore’s smile widened secretively and his eyes glimmered. “Otherwise, your grandmother never would have married him. But this is not the point. Despite your family similarities, you, James Potter, are very much your own man. In you, the whole is very much more than the sum of the parts.”

James considered this, not sure if he fully understood. He glanced up at his father. Harry looked aside at him, and nodded.

“And you, Mr. Walker,” Dumbledore narrowed his eyes slightly in amusement. “I have observed you as well, if fleetingly. The Sorting Hat was wise to place you in Ravenclaw. And make no mistake,” he nodded meaningfully, maintaining eye contact with the blond boy, “once a Ravenclaw, *always* a Ravenclaw. But intellect is only one of the horses hitched to your destiny. The other two are a fierce spirit and a soft heart. You are learning to align them, rather than pit them against each other. I expect great things from you.”

Zane beamed at this, for once at a loss for words.

“And Mr. Deedle,” Dumbledore said, stepping forward, drawing Ralph’s attention. “There is more of the Dolohov in you than you know. And despite what you may believe, that is not a bad thing. Even for your grandfather, it was not the blood in his veins that spoiled him, but the choices he made. Merlinus was quite right in what he said about you. Quite right indeed...”

He paused, regarding Ralph seriously. For his own part, Ralph refused to look up, refused to make eye contact with the tall figure before him.

“But now I realize that I am dawdling,” Dumbledore announced reluctantly, “I have been outside of time for too long, and am disused to its constraints. The hour is nearly upon me, and my counterpart awaits... I can delay no longer.”

He paced slowly past Ralph, approaching the cowering, shuddering figure huddled by the door. James, Zane and Harry turned to observe.

The figure on the floor cringed away from Dumbledore, whimpering, whispering rapid curses under his breath in a high, whining voice.

“In my lifetime, I sought you, nephew,” Dumbledore said, lowering himself before the pathetic figure. “And I found you. I always knew where you were. And yet, I did not approach. Do you know why?”

James didn't think the figure would reply. Grudje-- the Collector-- seemed almost beyond reason. Then, shrilly, he rasped, “you wanted to take it all away!”

“I did not approach you,” Dumbledore said softly, “because you would not allow it to be taken. What I placed into your infant mind was a mistake. I gave you the worst of me. I lied to myself, convinced myself it was the only way. I told myself I could take it back. And perhaps for a while, I could have. If I had located you when you were still young. But I found you as a young man. And even from a distance, I saw that you had embraced what I had sown in you. Not out of helplessness, but spite. I could no longer remove it from you, because you refused to let it go.”

“Power!” the Collector hissed furiously. “Strength! That's what it gave me!”

“Loneliness,” Dumbledore agreed somberly. “Emptiness. The slow, unrelenting destruction of your true self. That's what it gave you as well.”

“Yes!” the Collector gasped, and the gasp turned into a sob. “Yes...!”

“I could never take it from you because you were too angry to give it up. I considered fighting you for it, demanding that you release it, not for me, but for your own good. But I sensed such an approach would be futile. And then... well, I died.”

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“You died!” the Collector agreed eagerly, triumphantly. “You died and I was finally free!”

“You were finally imprisoned forever, with no hope of release,” Dumbledore said with a shake of his head. “And in my death, in the timelessness of the ever after, I realized something. I had been so obsessed with taking something from you... that I never realized that I needed to ask something from you first.”

The Collector shivered, shuddered, covered his face with his hands. He was terrified to ask, but seemed unable not to. “What? What is it you want?”

“Your forgiveness,” Dumbledore nodded gravely. He drew a deep, sorrowful breath. “I wronged you. I was foolish. Desperate. Arrogant. I faced a disaster of my own making, and looked for the surest way out. That way was you. And I am sorry. I am sorry for what I did to you. I beg your forgiveness.”

The Collector clamped his hands over his ears and shook his head. James saw that the pathetic man had been living with rage and pain for so long that it had become his world. He could no longer imagine living without it.

He did not offer Dumbledore his forgiveness. For his own part, Dumbledore did not seem to truly expect it.

“Your plan is in ruins,” he said plainly. “Your secrets are revealed. And you, my poor nephew, are a fractured, broken man. Will you, finally, after all these many years... allow me to help you?”

James watched breathlessly. The Collector’s shivering, shuddering restlessness increased. He seemed to retreat further into himself, his hands still clutching his head, refusing to answer for nearly a minute. Dumbledore did not rush him. Finally, faintly, the shuddering figure nodded his head.

Dumbledore nodded back. Wordlessly, he withdrew a long wand from his robes. Slowly, gently, he touched it to the Collector’s temple. The Collector flinched, but did not draw away. Dumbledore waited, his eyes closed. After a long moment, he drew the wand away again, pulling a long, brightly glowing thread behind it. The Collector moaned. At first, James thought it was a sound of pain, but as Dumbledore continued to withdraw the banked memories from his nephew’s temple, James understood that it was a groan of release, pent up for decades, nearly as old as the Collector himself.

The silvery thread broke away, dangled from Dumbledore's wand brightly, fluttering as if in a silent wind. The Collector slumped, his shivers suddenly and completely stopped.

Silently, Dumbledore placed the wand against his own temple. The silvery thread dimmed, faltered, and vanished. The wizened old man grimaced as it did.

Finally, he stood erect, pocketing his wand once more. He held out a hand to the man on the floor.

"Do you understand what just took place?"

The man looked up at Dumbledore. After a moment, he nodded.

"Do you remember everything that's happened up until this moment?"

Again, slowly and reluctantly, the man nodded.

"Then you know that you will be made to stand for your crimes. You must face this, and bear the consequences. They will be fair to you, considering what transpired here today. But I cannot promise you freedom. Nor should you expect it. Can you accept this?"

A third time, the man nodded, his eyes dimming with the realization of what he had done, and what he was sure to face.

"Then I shall remand you over to Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said, gesturing toward Harry. "He will take you where you must go, to face what you must face. But for now, stand with me, nephew. My time is up. Be with me as I depart."

The man on the floor reached up wearily, taking his uncle's hand. Dumbledore pulled him easily to his feet.

Standing, James saw that the man's face had reverted to Avior's--but different. There was something of Rechter Grudje in it, albeit softened, less cold. Further, there was a hint of the Collector as well. And yet, the sum total made the man look different than all three. He was suddenly, James saw, the nephew of the man before him, bearing a distinct family resemblance, but with his own unique face.

Dumbledore turned and crossed the office once more, this time approaching the tall shape of the Mirror of Erised. Silvery clouds still swirled behind its glass face, but there seemed to be other shapes moving beneath the veil of smoke, coming closer as James watched, mesmerized.

Harry Potter stopped Dumbledore with a look.

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“Headmaster... how is this possible?” he asked again. “And...” He paused, swallowed. Finally, taking a deep breath, he said, “Do you have to go back?”

Dumbledore met his old friend’s bright gaze. “I fear I do, Harry. These bargains are rare and ultimately short lived. I no longer belong to this world. But someone else does, someone who was kind enough to grant me this favour, in exchange for my help with some otherworldly endeavours of his own. But take heart. You never knew that the door between the living and the dead was a two-way door.”

James gasped. “That’s what the Gatekeeper said to me!”

“Ah yes,” Dumbledore nodded. “In that, the creature that calls itself the Gatekeeper did not lie. But it fools itself into thinking it is Lord Guardian of that door. It is not. Trust me on that. Even the Gatekeeper, that great beast of the otherworld, sees but through a glass darkly...”

Harry stepped back sadly, placing an arm around his son’s shoulder.

“I am sorry, Harry,” Dumbledore said, and James could see that the old man truly meant it. “But this is not goodbye. Do take heart. There is much more to come.” He sighed deeply, and then turned away, approaching the swirling smoke of the Mirror. “Oh, and one more thing,” he said, turning to look back over his shoulder, smiling crookedly. “Do say hello to my namesake for me. And for Severus as well.”

Harry nodded and smiled. “I will. And Headmaster, one more request...?”

Dumbledore’s smile widened. His eyes sparkled again. “I know that I forbade it once, but that was when you were young. You are a man now. I suppose... one more look into the Mirror couldn’t hurt. Just don’t let me see you.”

Harry nodded again, gratified.

Dumbledore approached the Mirror, drawing his nephew along with him. “Stay and watch,” he said to the slightly younger man. “Someone wants to see you.”

On the other side of the Mirror, shapes moved, pushing through the silvery smoke. One emerged as a silhouette-- tall, broad shouldered, moving with a sort of reserved impatience.

“You very nearly took too long, Albus,” a deep, grating voice said tersely. “I might have been marooned here forever.”

“My deepest apologies, Merlinus,” Dumbledore answered lightly. “Tardiness has oft been my greatest weakness.”

James’ heart pounded in his chest, and yet he couldn’t quite bring himself to truly believe what he was hearing and seeing.

Slowly, carefully, Dumbledore stepped into-- and through-- the Mirror. The glass bent and rippled like water, allowing him to pass. As it did so, another shape pushed out, seeming almost to pass through the diminishing shape of Albus Dumbledore. This new figure was tall, broad, dressed in dark robes beneath a short leather vest. A deep crimson cloak hung from his shoulders, beneath a rugged face, grey-bearded, with dark eyes as wild and solemn as a full moon at midnight.

It was unmistakably-- and of course-- Merlinus Ambrosius.

James grinned up at him, helplessly, nearly giddy with relief. Merlin met his gaze and gave a stiff smile. “You knew that I would not stay gone,” he rumbled, spreading his large hands. “I do so hate this age. But some of its people...” He switched his gaze from James, to Zane, to Ralph, “I have grown rather fond of.”



Dumbledore’s nephew stood near the edge of the Mirror, staring into the swirling depths, watching after his departed uncle.

Harry stepped forward, approaching Merlinus tentatively.

“Is it really you?” he asked, studying the big man’s face. “I admit, I don’t know you quite as well as I knew the man you just switched places with.”

“It is I,” Merlin confirmed. “And if I am not mistaken, the post of headmaster has just been vacated once again. I assume none would argue if I resumed where I left off one year ago?”

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Zane grinned and muttered, "I don't think anyone would have the guts to."

"I further presume that my staff is exactly where I left it?" Merlin inquired perfunctorily.

"I think you know very well that it is," Harry smiled wryly.

Glancing around, James noticed that, along with Dumbledore's departure, the office had reverted back to what currently passed for its normal state. The Phoenix was gone, as were the clockwork gizmos and shelves of books. Shadows loomed in empty corners. The hearth was cold and dark. The only light in the room was a pool of pale blue, soft as moonlight, which surrounded the Mirror of Erised, emanating from its shifting, restless depths.

"Look," Ralph suddenly said, his voice hushed. He pointed at the Mirror. Harry and Merlin both turned, stepping aside as they did so.

Figures moved beyond the heaving silvery fog, accompanied by the faint echo of voices. James recognized the sound-- it was the same as he had heard wafting from the portal of Merlin's portrait, earlier that evening, the sound his father had warned him back from. The man that had recently been Rechter Grudje watched and listened, his eyes wide, worried, even fearful. The others backed away, forming a respectful semi-circle in the darkness.

Three figures stepped forward from the fog, separating from the seemingly endless throng beyond. James squinted to see them. The one on the right was the tallest, a man with long grey hair, rough as straw and weeded with black. His eyes were blue, like Albus Dumbledore's, but harder, glaring from a rugged, tanned face. The figure on the left was older than he, but not frail. In the world they occupied, James understood, age had virtually no meaning. Still, her face was lined, careworn. Her hair, however, was still mostly black, piled up in a complicated bun with loose curls framing her face.

The figure in the centre moved to the fore, however, not taking her eyes from the man standing on the opposite side of the Mirror. She seemed younger than him, thin and pale, her own dark hair hanging in waves over a high forehead and down to her narrow shoulders. The expression on her face was tense with interest.

"Who--" the man before her asked haltingly, "Who are you?"

The young woman smiled sadly, affectionately. "Why, I'm your mother." Her voice was light, ghostly, fluttering like moth's wings.

“My mother,” the man repeated, as if he had never heard the word before. He drifted toward the Mirror glass, raising one hand to touch it, as if to reach through to the young woman beyond.

James remembered her name from Avior’s diary. This was the unfortunate Ariana Dumbledore, killed in the battle between Albus and Grindelwald. That made the tall man Aberforth, her brother, much more recently deceased, and the older woman, Kendra, the mother of all three Dumbledores, who had met her fate on the night the man on the other side of the glass was born.

Ariana smiled at her son as she regarded him, her face brimming with melancholy affection.

“He looks like him,” Aberforth admitted, speaking to the other two. “Round about the eyes. I couldn’t have said so when I was alive. But now...”

“He does,” Kendra nodded mistily.

“Who,” the man before them asked, his shape barely a silhouette before the glowing Mirror. “Who are you talking about?”

“We’re talkin’ about you, silly,” Aberforth said, his mouth cinching into a lopsided smile. “You look just like him, is what we’re sayin’.”

“No,” the silhouetted figure said, facing his family for the first time in his memory, clearly wishing he could push through the glass to join them. “Who do I look like?”

Ariana smiled more broadly now. The smile lit her face, made her eyes twinkle with that familiar, Dumbledore cheer. “You look like your father,” she said soothingly, studying her son on the other side of the glass. “His name was Timothy. Same as you.”

The silhouetted figure was silent for a long, frozen moment. When he spoke again, his voice was faint, thin with wonder. “My name...” he said slowly, “is Timothy.”

Ariana nodded. “Your name is Timothy,” she agreed. “And you... are my son.”

“I’m your son,” Timothy nodded, more firmly now. “My name is Timothy, just like my father before me. And I’m your son.”

All three Dumbledores smiled at this.

“And don’t you forget it,” Aberforth added firmly.

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Gradually, the swirling fog began to reclaim them. They moved back, descending once again into shadows, vanishing into the layers of ghostly voices.

Timothy stood back as well, keeping his eyes on the shifting glass. He mouthed to himself, soundlessly repeating the words that had been given him.

Merlin looked aside at James and Harry. "Go," he prodded. "The magic grows weak. Soon, the images in the Mirror will again be reduced to mere haunts and reflections."

James felt his father's hand tighten around his shoulders.

"Do you want to, James?" he asked.

James didn't answer immediately. He was afraid of the Mirror. Afraid of what he might see beyond its naked, shifting glass.

"I don't--" he whispered haltingly, "I don't want to see Granddad." He hated how it sounded. The truth was, he wanted to see his lost grandfather very much. But after his experience with the Gatekeeper, when he had been taunted with an image of the departed Arthur Weasley, seemingly alive and well, he didn't think he could bear such a teasingly bittersweet image again.

To James' relief, his father nodded. "I know what you mean, son. But the Mirror of Erised is, first and foremost, a mirror of desire. It won't show you anything you don't want to see."

James considered this. "All right," he agreed. "Then yes. I want to look."

He remembered what this Mirror had shown his father once before, when he had been younger even than James was now; it had offered him a glimpse of his dead parents. And yet, according to headmaster Dumbledore, that image had only been an illusion, a sort of ghostly echo culled from young Harry Potter's deepest desires. Tonight, the Mirror seemed to offer more than that. Tonight, the faces it showed seemed real-- not even like ghosts, but more like living people, people who had simply passed on to some other world, easy as someone might walk into another room. Tonight, for one brief moment, those dearly departed could look back, gazing through the Mirror as if it was a window between realities.

James approached the Mirror at his father's side, and still he hung back.

What if it shows Lucy? he thought suddenly, an ice pick of guilt stabbing into his heart. *I couldn't bear that! Not because I don't want to see her, but because the want is so great that I'm afraid it would crush me!*

James needn't have worried, however. Figures moved beyond the fog, coming to meet him and his father as they reached the Mirror. The first to step forward into the light, James saw, were his long-dead grandparents. James senior wore glasses, just like his son. His hair was greying slightly at the temples, but apart from that he looked no older than the man before him-- younger even. The woman, James' grandmother, had long, pale hair. Her face was ethereal in the bluish light, less stunningly gorgeous than deeply pretty, as if her beauty was something that shined from within, waking up with her every morning and going to sleep with her each night.

"You're all grown up, Harry," the man, James senior, said proudly. "And this is your son, I see."

"Of course he is," James' grandmother said, beaming at James. "Just look at him!"

Harry drew a long, shuddering breath. "It's good to see you again, Mum, Dad."

James senior accepted this with a wry smile. "Not quite the same now as it was back then, is it?"

Harry laughed softly. "They say we all get two chances at the parental relationship. I missed yours. I still do. But I'm experiencing that relationship from the other side now." He squeezed James' shoulder and glanced aside at him. "I think I just wanted you to see that. And to know that... I'm happier now. I still miss you both-- very much. But... I'm happy."

Lily and James senior put arms around each other, meeting their son's smile with gratified smiles of their own. There didn't seem to be anything more to say.

With that, James' grandparents faded. They didn't drop back into the fog, however, but seemed to drift forward, passing on either side of the Mirror's edge. More figures came forward in their place.

"Wotcher, Harry!" This was a young woman. Like Nastasia, she had bright, bubble gum pink hair. James didn't know her name, but his father grinned suddenly, his face filled with delight.

"Hi Tonks!" he called happily. "How's Remus?"

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“Ask him yourself,” the pink-haired witch shrugged, cocking a thumb over her shoulder. A man stood behind her, taller than she, his eyes twinkling with recognition.

“Still casting your stag Patronus, eh Harry?” he inquired, slipping forward through the fog.

“Not much need to anymore,” Harry answered, “not since all the Dementors were banished back to the netherworld.”

“And good riddance, I say,” Remus nodded with feeling, slipping past the edge of the glass. “Still, can’t hurt to always have some chocolate handy. And keep an eye on our young Teddy, will you?”

“I will!” Harry promised, raising his voice as the couple passed out of sight.

Another figure emerged. James recognized this one immediately by his lank black hair and thin frame.

“Give ‘em hell, Harry,” Sirius Black said bracingly. “And tell ‘em it’s from me!”

Harry shook his head, bemused. “And who shall I give hell to, then, Sirius?”

“Whoever deserves it!” Sirius called with a laugh, drifting past the Mirror’s left edge.

The next figure was a young man with red hair. James knew who this was immediately as well.

“It’s all bloody brilliant, Harry!” Fred Weasley announced enthusiastically. “Tell George, will you? It’s all totally, bloody brilliant! He’s going to completely love it! You all will!”

“I will!” Harry agreed, his voice breaking slightly. “I’ll tell him! I’ll tell everybody!”

James was surprised to see a house elf appear next, his eyes as huge and round as tennis balls, his head adorned with an inexplicable stack of terribly knitted hats.

“Don’t be sad, Harry Potter!” the elf waved. “Dobby is happy! Dobby has no regrets!”

James glanced up as his father nodded. He suddenly seemed unable to speak.

An owl flew past as if in slow motion, snowy white and hooting happily.

Following the owl was a stocky man who'd once had a horribly disfigured face, now restored and smiling grimly ("Constant vigilance, Harry!" he encouraged as he passed).

Next was a young boy, fresh faced, looking eerily like Cameron Creevey.

Just past him, on the outer edge of the Mirror's view, two figures passed discreetly, hanging back, but apparently wanting glimpses of their own. One was Arthur Weasley, of course. James' grandfather craned his head to look out at James and Harry, giving a brief, secret wave with his right hand. His left arm was around a young girl with shining black hair, her eyes bright with curiosity. She did not smile as she drifted past, but her eyes twinkled darkly.

...I forgave you that very night...

James' heart swelled in his chest, even as he blinked away sudden tears. He realized that he could bear seeing his grandfather and lost cousin after all. It was a bittersweet sight, certainly, but he knew that something essential would have been missing had they not appeared, peeking subtly from the swirl of otherworldly fog.

After them came more... many more. James ceased recognizing any of them, although the faces were hauntingly familiar. Dimly, he understood that he was now witnessing a silent procession of his own ancestors, men and women, some as old as Dumbledore, others younger than James himself, all smiling, with glittering, strangely knowing eyes, nodding as they swept past.

Until finally, a young woman stood in the Mirror. She was only a few years older than James, with a freckle-dusted nose, dark blonde hair and deep, almond eyes. She seemed somehow taller than she was, not because she wore boots and a collection of fine gold-edged armour beneath her cape, but because she had an undeniable air of nobility about her.

Unlike the others, she did not drift past. She stood in the centre of the Mirror as if very little happened to her that she did not cause herself. She cocked her head at James, then his father.

"And who might you be?" she asked. Despite her question, her eyes, like those before her, glimmered with secret knowledge.

"I'm Harry," James' father answered, offering the woman a small bow. "Harry Potter."

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Her smile broadened, crinkling the corners of her eyes. “Indeed, yes,” she said to herself. “Harry the Potter. I am in your debt, it seems, my dear Potter. For when I was very young, or so the story goes, my life was saved for the sake of your birth.”

To James’ surprise, his father slipped easily into the woman’s strange cadence of speech. “Does that make you my great grandmother, many ages removed, dear lady?”

“I should say that it does,” the woman agreed easily. “And since time means nothing here, it does not even make me feel old. But pray, do not call me grandmother, great or otherwise. Call me Gabriella.”

Harry bowed again. “That I shall, Lady Gabriella, when we are fortunate enough to meet again and tell our long, interesting tales.”

Gabriella smiled at the man on the other side of the glass and shook her head, as if she suspected he was a bit of a rogue. Then, she shifted her gaze to James and took a step closer, coming just to the other side of the glass.

“And who might you be, young prince?” she asked, cocking her head almost as if she recognized him.

“I’m James, Ma’am,” James answered, strangely captivated by the beautiful, regal woman before him.

“*James*,” she said slowly, as if sharing a delicious, whimsical secret with him. “What a wonderful, *delightful* name...”



The End of Term feast took place the next day, just as always, and amazingly, the Great Hall was restored completely, with the four house tables lining the main floor and the dais once again weighted down with the matching staff tables. The four school vanishing cabinets had been reinstalled along the front of the dais, all fully repaired (with Merlin's help), their disenchantments postponed until the end of the feast. As a result, and by design, the house tables were packed to overflowing, peppered with Beauxbatons students in powder blue silk robes, stern Durmstrangs in stiff, high collars and double-breasted formal tunics (including the stony-faced Volkiev, who sat amongst a cabal of breathlessly adoring Ravenclaw girls), a scattering of Alma Alerons in their various house colours, most noisily arguing the relative merits of Quidditch and Clutchcudgel, and last but assuredly not least, a sprinkling of Muggle students from Yorke Academy, including Morton Comstock (who sat with the Slytherins, somehow managing to make friends with the house that most traditionally rejected anything other than pureblood wizardry) and Lucia Gruberova, who was laughing delightedly with Lily and her friends further down the Gryffindor table.

Ranged along every table, filling centrepieces of golden bowls, were drifts of red, purple and yellow flower petals, all as fresh and fragrant as if they had just been picked.

There was no sign of the broken statues of the Magical Brethren or the temporary reflecting pool. Gone as well was the ugly five-faced Clock. James knew not where, but felt quite sure that the Clock had met a neat end at the hand of the man who sat in the centre of the dais, his grey eyes roaming the crowded, bustling Hall, his beard bristling beneath a grim, satisfied smile.

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James had had very little chance to talk to Merlin since his return. The restored headmaster had spent most of the day repopulating his office with his collection of mysterious magical tools and curiosities, including, as before (and completely inexplicably) an enormous stuffed alligator which hung from the ceiling, surveying the desk below with dark, glassy eyes. James, Ralph and Rose had stopped by just after lunch that afternoon, and James had had the strangest impression that Merlin and the alligator had been conversing idly until the students entered the room.

“So what happened to you, Headmaster?” Rose had asked. “Last year, on the Night of the Unveiling. Everyone thought you died!”

“The answer to that question would require a stack of books as high as this room, Ms. Weasley,” Merlinus replied without looking up from his work. “Suffice it to say, there are many shades of death. Fortunately for me-- and all of you, I daresay-- I was only *mostly* dead.”

“Headmaster Dumbledore talked as if you and he had some sort of big adventure on the other side of the Mirror,” James prodded. “Is that true?”

Merlin did pause then, glancing up as he plunked a stack of slab-like books onto his desk with a puff of dust. He looked not at James, however, but at the portrait of Dumbledore that hung on the wall. James turned toward it, as if the portrait itself might answer his question. Albus Dumbledore was back in his frame again, his bearded chin resting on his chest and his peaked hat pulled over his brow. He snored faintly, somewhat unconvincingly.

“Yes,” Merlin acknowledged. “I suppose that’s true enough. He assisted me when I needed it, making my return possible. And in return, I allowed him to occupy my place in this reality for a short time.”

Ralph cocked his head curiously. “Any chance we’ll ever hear the rest of that story?”

“A stack of books as high as this room, Mr. Deedle,” Merlin replied again dismissively, returning to his work.

On the way back from the headmaster’s office, James, Ralph and Rose had run across Peeves the Poltergeist, who had apparently, somehow, returned along with Merlinus Ambrosius. He seemed especially agitated with them, pelting them with bits of chalk and chasing them along the corridor.

“Nasty students!” he cried angrily, “Letting such horrors as the Lady of the Lake into Hogwarts! Letting her swipe away poor, harmless Peeves! Nasty, reckless, irresponsible students!”

“We didn’t *let* her in!” Ralph protested angrily, shielding his head as he ran. “She invaded! We had no say in the matter!”

James could not help laughing helplessly as he ran. He couldn’t wait to tell his Uncle George that he had been lectured about responsibility by Peeves the Poltergeist.

Now, as the babble of excited students rang from the walls of the Great Hall, Merlin stood and approached the podium at the centre of the dais. The room quieted slowly, all eyes turning toward the big man, awaiting his first official words as reinstated headmaster.

“And so it seems quite curious,” he said, smiling his grim smile, “that my first day back is your last day here.”

This was greeted with a smattering of laughter and applause. From the Slytherin table, Albus cupped his hands to his mouth and hooted.

“Nevertheless, you shall return again in a few months’ time,” Merlin went on, raising his voice easily over the happy crowd, “And once again, we shall apply ourselves to the pursuit of knowledge, sport, and friendship. In the spirit of this, some things might best be addressed now, so that you shall know what you will be returning to.”

The Hall quieted again, somewhat restlessly.

Merlin lowered his voice, growing serious. “You have been told that we live in uncertain times pupils. And because of this uncertainty, a number of new rules have been instituted. Age-old freedoms have been curtailed. Restrictions have been introduced. All in pursuit of the venerable cause of security.”

A mutter of discontent threaded through the room as the mood darkened. James heard whispered references to the restrictions and searching of post, the ban on social gatherings, the new Draconian requirements for Hogsmeade weekends...

“I will not tell you happy lies, pupils,” Merlin went on, gazing soberly around the Hall. “I have met with the teachers behind me. I have spoken to those at the highest levels of the Ministry of Magic, as well as those of other magical and academic institutions across many nations...”

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Here, James saw Beauxbatons students nodding at each other. Volkiev sat up, his face turning even grimmer with pride. Obviously, Merlin's meetings with leaders around the magical world was no secret.

"And I will tell you that what you have heard is indeed the truth," Merlin continued. "This *is* an uncertain age, pupils." He regarded them soberly, leaning slightly over the podium. "But if there is one thing I have learned in all of my many centuries and prodigious travels, my young friends, it is this: *every* age is an age of uncertainty. There has been no time without its own great dangers, no era that has been free of the strain of worry, of looming threats, of wickedness or danger or imminent, dangling apocalypse..." He paused, and James suddenly realized that Merlin was-- if not joking, then certainly making light. The big man's beard bristled as he smiled tightly. A murmur of soft laughter blew over the room like a warm breeze.

"As this is the case," Merlin announced briskly, "your teachers and I have determined that there is nothing to be gained by special rules, rubrics or restrictions designed only to cater to some imagined unique level of danger. Risk is the world that we live in, pupils. This has been true since the dawn of time. And while we, your guardians and teachers, shall avoid unnecessary dangers wherever possible, as well as provide you the reasonable protection and security you need to learn, to grow, to become the fine young witches and wizards you are destined to be, we will not stunt that development in the name of absolute safety."

He allowed this to sink in for a long moment. Then, he tilted his head back and raised his arms. "Owl post," he announced firmly, "shall return to its usual, unrestricted and natural state. Receive your mothers' cookies, your fathers' howlers, your orders of dung bombs and Skiving Snackboxes without fear. What you do with those things may well fall under our jurisdiction, but *how* you receive them is your purview entirely."

A roar of applause exploded across the hall as a fleet of owls entered, streaming through the high windows and bearing all variety of envelopes, packages, parcels, newspapers, and magazines.

"There shall be no more restrictions on gatherings, social or otherwise," Merlin went on, his smiling voice booming easily over the applause and the clapping flutter of wings. "Organize what you will, be it study groups, duelling clubs, illicit night outings, kitchen raids... our duty is to catch you in misdeeds, not to prevent you from dreaming of them."

The applause redoubled at this. James noticed that a few of those seated at the staff table responded a bit less enthusiastically. Professor Votary, James was amused to see, was not among them. He stood before his chair, clapping firmly. Elsewhere along the staff table, Professors McGonagall, Revalvier and Longbottom, fully restored to their posts on this last day, applauded as well, nodding with satisfaction.

“And finally,” Merlin’s voice rang out, dimming the applause slightly, “There shall be no consequence other than your grades for unfinished schoolwork. It is not the duty of this school to force you to live up to your potential. It is your duty to yourself. We shall provide the means, you shall provide the effort, and the world shall be as it should.”

This was met with somewhat diminished applause, except for one pair of very loudly clapping hands at the rear of the Great Hall. James turned toward the sound and saw Mr. Filch banging his hands together violently, his sagging face grim with fervour. He no longer carried Grudje’s black cane, James knew, nor spent his time beholden to the nagging statue of the former headmaster.

“Maybe he’s had his fill of punishing us,” Graham mused wistfully.

Scorpius shook his head. “I wouldn’t get your hopes up. Still, everything’s back as it should be. And I hear there’s going to be a special meeting of all the school teachers and Filch. They’re going to ‘officially define and limit the caretaker’s duties and responsibilities’.”

“In other words,” Deirdre suggested with a mean grin, “they’re going to give him a good smacking down and assure that he can never again live up to his inner tyrant.”

“All I know,” James commented, glancing back at Filch again, “is that I’d pay a hundred galleons to be there when Professor Longbottom has his say.”

“Or McGonagall!” Rose nodded eagerly.

A roar of applause lifted from the Hall again. James glanced around and realized that the House Cup had been awarded. The Ravenclaws hooted and shouted happily, congratulating themselves and taunting the other tables. Among them, James observed Zane clapping and hooting most raucously of all, as if he himself had won half the sapphires in the Ravenclaw hourglass, despite not having attended Hogwarts for three years.

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“And now,” Merlin called out in conclusion, “there is but one remaining order of business. It seems that our reigning Quidditch champions, the Hufflepuffs--”

Another roar of feverish applause interrupted the headmaster, this time rising from the yellow and black robed students at the Hufflepuff table. Merlin allowed this with an imperious nod.

“...*despite* their well-deserved celebration, are apparently entering the summer holiday without the benefit of a new trophy prominently displayed in their common room. This, I believe we can all agree, cannot be allowed to stand.”

With that, Merlin stood back from the podium and lifted his staff. As usual, James could not remember the staff being in the headmaster’s hand a moment before-- it seemed to simply appear whenever he required it, as if the ancient sorcerer kept it hidden in an invisible cupboard, constantly at the ready. James could imagine the relief Viktor Krum and the rest of the Harriers felt at no longer having to guard the eerily powerful object.

Merlin lowered the staff, connecting it to the floor of the dais with a ringing, hollow *bang*. The runes of the staff flared blue for a moment. Immediately following this, the Hufflepuff table erupted again into surprised, delighted cheers.

James turned in his seat to look. Standing in the middle of the Hufflepuff table, rising above the heads of the wildly celebrating students, was the darkly glimmering shape of the Crystal Chalice, somehow fully restored and reflecting prisms of light from its ancient facets.

Across from James, Devindar Das half rose from his feet, his eyes intent, his mouth set in a tight frown. With a disconsolate sigh he plopped back down.

“Bloody beautiful trophy,” he muttered. “James, I don’t care if you’re on your ruddy deathbed for next year’s Quidditch try-out. You’re showing up and you’re replacing Vassar. Got it?”

It wasn’t a request. James nodded, his chest swelling happily.

There was a loud clanking noise from the staff table. James glanced up in time to see Hagrid and Professor Debellows just concluding a toast of their enormous tankards. Together the two men stood and began to lead the Hall in a spirited, somewhat unmusical rendition of the Hogwarts tribute.

James noticed that even Merlin joined in.



James was just finishing packing that night, alone in the Gryffindor dormitory, when a ghostly shape approached, flitting soundlessly through the stone wall next to him.

James startled, nearly dropping the wad of unfolded clothes in his arms.

“Cedric!” he gasped. “That Spectre of Silence thing...! Seriously!”

“Sorry,” the ghost replied, unsmiling. “One of Snape’s portraits sent me to get you. He says you should get down to the hospital wing right away.”

James blinked at Cedric’s ghost. “Why? Rose is fine, isn’t she? She was all healed up by the time we got to the feast. Everyone else as well.”

Cedric didn’t explain any further. “Just go on down. Hagrid’s there. And Petra Morganstern, I think. Sort of.”

With that, James’ eyes widened. He dumped the last of his clothes into his trunk and dashed down the stairs.

Two minutes later, he clambered to a halt in front of the pebbled glass doors of the hospital wing, unconsciously slowing to listen, anxious for any sign of what might be beyond. Faint voices echoed from inside, but he couldn’t make out any words. Tentatively, suddenly afraid of what he might see, James pushed the doors open.

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Madame Curio was bent over a shape on a bed half-way down the ward. Every other bed was neatly made, crisply white, making the single occupied bed seem especially incongruous and unexpected.

“James,” a deep voice said quietly. James turned to see Hagrid standing just inside the double doors, his face pale, his black eyes serious. “How’d you know to come?”

“Someone, er, sent for me,” James replied, deciding in an instant that it might be better to keep Cedric out of it. “What’s going on? Who’s been hurt?”

“Well, that’s the thing, innit,” Hagrid said, glancing over James’ shoulder, to the occupied bed halfway down the ward. “She’s not hurt, s’ far as Madame Curio can tell. She’s just... dyin’. Or not. Nobody can tell.”

“Who?” James whispered, turning back, caught between wanting to rush to the bed and a powerful reluctance to see who occupied it. “Is it Petra?”

“Whuh?” Hagrid said, confused. “Petra? Morganstern? No, no. It’s that girl. The one from the States, with the pink hair. Hendricks, I b’lieve ‘er name is.”

“Nastasia?” James clarified, dropping his voice. “But...?”

“Found ‘er in the cellars,” Hagrid whispered roughly. “Jus’ lyin’ there in the dark, half dead, all by ‘erself. But no injuries, no sign of curses, nothin’!” Hagrid was clearly deeply unsettled by this. Obviously, he had carried Nastasia to the hospital wing himself, bringing her directly to Madame Curio.

“She’s jus’ wakin’ up,” Hagrid went on. “She asked for yeh especial. I don’ know how yeh knew that, but now that yer here, well, you can talk to ‘er if yeh want. Maybe find out what’s happened to ‘er. If yer willing, o’ course.”

James nodded faintly. Slowly, he approached the bed as Madame Curio retreated to her office, shaking her head and muttering to herself.

Nastasia lay in a pool of yellow light from the nearby lamp. Apart from her clothing, which was grimy and damp, she looked the same as always, as if she had simply lain down on the hospital bed for a quick cat-nap. She opened her eyes as James reached the side of the bed.

“Hi,” she said quietly.

“Hi,” James said back, studying her face. “Er... Hagrid says you’re hurt. What happened?”

Nastasia closed her eyes again and tilted her head away. “Two snakes go out,” she replied faintly, “but only one comes back. It was always going to be that way eventually, I guess.”

James frowned. He thought back to the scene in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom-- the two snakes, both representing the conflicting sides of Nastasia’s personality, Nasti and Ashya, fighting for dominance, finally reduced to outright battle.

“You couldn’t kill Rose, or the rest of us,” he said. “Part of you was ready to-- the Nasti part. But the Ashya part fought back. It made you go to war with yourself. Is that it?”

Nastasia nodded, still not meeting his eyes.

“And now... part of you is... dead?” James asked, his voice unconsciously lowered to a whisper. “Is that it?”

Nastasia nodded again, staring across the ward to the dark windows that lined the wall beyond.

James shook his head. “But, what does that mean? Will you be all right? Hagrid says... he says you’re dying. Is that true?”

Nastasia finally turned her head back to him. “I don’t know,” she answered, and James saw that she was silently terrified. Her voice was a thin whisper. “I’ve never felt anything like it. I’ve never been so lonely. So empty and weak. Part of me is chopped off. I don’t want to live like this... I don’t think I can...”

James shook his head again, more firmly this time. “You can. You just... need to learn how. You can do it. I mean...” he stopped, groping for the right words. “You faced the darkest part of you. You did what most of us could never do. You confronted the worst in you and you overcame it! That’s... amazing, really! And because of that, Rose and Ralph and I, we’re all still alive now. You’re... well, sort of a hero. There’s that, isn’t there? Ashya... you’re a hero. Hold onto that, all right?”

She smiled at him faintly and her eyes thickened with sudden tears. She closed them and the tears ran down her cheeks, dropping to the pillow. With some effort, she raised her hand and beckoned him forward.

James leaned closer, sidling nearer to the head of the bed. She turned her head toward him again, beckoning him still closer. Weakly, she lifted her head from the pillow, reaching up to hold onto James’ shoulder and using it for leverage. When her lips were next to his cheek,

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he thought briefly that she meant to kiss him again. He half wanted her to, and feared it. Instead, faintly, she whispered into his ear.

"I'm... not... Ashya."

James' eyes widened and a sense of deep cold descended over him, chilling him to his heels. He backed away involuntarily, causing the girl to fall back onto the pillow, her hand dropping over the side of the bed. She was laughing silently, her chest rising and falling in swift huffs.

"I'm not... *Ashya*," she said again through helpless laughter, tears still wet on her cheeks. "Ashya's dead... I watched her die. She was so noble, so brave, so... *foolish*. She battled the Lady by herself. I wouldn't join her. I refused to..." her voice climbed to a mad squeak and she laughed harder. More tears leaked from her eyes, joining the wet streaks already on her face. She turned to James as he backed away from the bed, horror-struck. "But she was so beautiful, even at the end," she gasped. "The Lady crushed her head beneath her heel. She laughed... she cackled as she did it. And when it was over, when the Lady had run away, still laughing her crazy, demented laugh... I went back. I went back to my foolish, dead sister. Poor, dead Ashya. I rejoined her. What else could I do? What else?" She forced herself upright on the bed, rising on one elbow, staring at James intently, begging him with her eyes. "Ashya's dead!" she said again, firming her voice to a shrill plea, her laughter breaking into gasping sobs. "Oh Ashya! Why did you leave me? What's Nasti without Ashya? What's the brain without the heart? How does half a person live? Ashya! You'll come back, won't you? You have to come back! I need you...!"

She fell back, her laughs and sobs breaking into panting, ragged breaths, muttering feverishly to herself.

A thin, warm hand laced into James', threading his fingers and gripping tight. Somehow, without taking his eyes from the shifting, moaning girl on the bed, James knew that it was Petra standing next to him.

"Will she be all right?" he asked her.

Petra shook her head. "I don't know," she answered softly. "I'm a sorceress. Not a prophetess."

Slowly, silently, they turned, hand in hand, and retreated along the ward. Darkness descended around them, dimming the windows, claiming the beds one by one, until James and Petra walked alone, moving in that strange between-world that they alone seemed able to access.

“So what happens now?” James asked darkly, all the cheer sucked from his heart by the image of Nastasia’s pathetic, diminished shape. “Is Judith gone? Was it worth it?”

“She’s not gone,” Petra sighed. “But the connection between us is broken. We’re no longer sister fates, she and Izzy and I. And that makes her weaker. Possibly even more dangerous, since she’ll be desperate now, clinging to her place in this reality. But weaker.”

“Weaker than you?” James asked, glancing aside at her. She nodded.

James stopped her, still holding tightly onto her hand. “So what happens now?” he asked again.

Petra lowered her eyes to their clasped hands. “All that remains now,” she said, mustering her resolve, “is the Crimson Thread.”

James frowned and shook his head. “That’s what Avior-- or Grudje, or whoever he was at that point-- that’s what he was on about, too. But like I told him, the Crimson Thread wasn’t really a thread, was it? That was just a symbol. The real Crimson Thread was Morgan, and she’s dead.” He glanced up in frustration and confusion. “Judith lied to Avior. She told him *I* was the key to the Crimson Thread. She told him *I* held it in my hand.”

Petra was still looking down at their clasped hands. “Judith didn’t lie, James,” she said softly. “You *are* the key to Crimson Thread. And you do hold it in your hand.” She raised her eyes to him again, studying his face. “When Judith killed Morgan, it made Morgan part of our world, our reality. She belongs to this destiny now. I can’t explain why, but that’s just how it works. Morgan is no longer the Crimson Thread. Now...” she paused meaningfully. “Now... *I* am.”

James met Petra’s eyes, his own brow furrowed in confusion. “*You’re* the Crimson Thread...? But... that means...”

“What it means will come later,” Petra sighed. “But look,” she raised their held hands. James looked down at them. A faint silvery glow emanated from between their fingers, the remnant of the mysterious cord he had conjured, using Petra’s own magic, to save her life. “I warned you that you’d regret what you did,” she said, still looking into his eyes. “You see? Judith was right. You are the key to the Crimson Thread. You hold it right here, in your hand. We’re connected. Like it or not, as long as I occupy this destiny... we’re part of each other. We’re one.”

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James considered this, switching his gaze from their gently glowing hands to her eyes. He was struck once again that he was now somewhat taller than her.

“And still,” he said, feeling slightly bold, no longer caring about the repercussions, “I don’t regret it. I’m glad I saved you, Petra. And I’m glad that we’re connected. I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

Petra closed her eyes and shook her head slowly. The ghost of an amused, gratified smile curled her lips.

And then, a moment later, James stood in the hospital ward, halfway between the waiting Hagrid and the shifting, muttering Nastasia.

You may regret it still, Petra’s voice echoed faintly, heard by none but him. *But for now, I am glad you don’t. And nor do I, James... Nor do I...*

James nodded to show that he’d heard.

“Any idea what’s wrong with ‘er, then?” Hagrid asked, wringing his huge hands as James returned to him.

James shook his head, casting about for some way to explain. “She’s lost part of herself,” he shrugged helplessly, glancing back. “Maybe she’ll get it back. We’re wizards and witches, after all. Anything’s possible.”

Hagrid nodded fretfully, as if these were sage words. James sat down with him on the bench that ran next to the hospital wing’s double doors. They were silent for several minutes. Nastasia-- Nasti-- seemed to have fallen into a deep, thankfully dreamless sleep.

“We’ll transfer her back to her own school tomorrow,” Hagrid whispered. “They’ve got one o’ the best medical colleges in the world, I hear. They’ll... they’ll be able ter help ‘er, I wager.”

James nodded. He wanted to believe Hagrid was right. He bid the half-giant goodnight and, as quietly as he could, slipped out of the hospital wing. Slowly, thoughtfully, he made his way back to the Gryffindor common room, his mind reeling gently...

He glanced down at his hand. It was still, somehow, warm with Petra’s touch, but the faint glow had vanished. It was still there, of course. Just invisible.

The Crimson Thread had to be returned to its own destiny. James knew that was what Petra had in mind. How she would accomplish this-- and how he might have to help, despite his own desires-- haunted his thoughts. But for now, in the wake of their secret meeting,

he felt a strange, numb calm. He couldn't explain it, even to himself. He just accepted it, gratefully letting it fill in the spaces where worry, fear, and loss might soon take over.

He reminded himself that, for the moment, all was well.

Judith was banished, her connection to Petra and Izzy destroyed.

Merlin was back, restored to life and once again presiding as headmaster over Hogwarts.

The Morrigan Web had been defeated.

And perhaps most deeply satisfying of all, Petra was glad to be a part of him, and he a part of her. James walked on, content with this. For now, all was well.

For now, he held the Crimson Thread in his hand.

THE END

AND THUS WE REACH THE END OF ANOTHER JAMES POTTER BOOK...

...and as always I have you, Dear Reader, to thank for it. While I was assuming that the James Potter series was languishing into obscurity, fading away while I worked on the ever-necessary “day job”, you were not only reading (and in many cases re-reading!) the stories, you were telling your family and friends about them, posting reviews on Goodreads.com (20,000 reviews so far, with a four-star average rating), creating translations (nine languages at last count, with more on the way), and sending constant notes of encouragement and inspiration.

Because of you, the James Potter series has developed a truly worldwide audience, reaching truly untold numbers (I stopped keeping track after the first million) of readers. And thus, this series continues to be a labour of love that gives me what every writer longs for even more than financial success: legions of readers and positive feedback!

For that, let me say as loudly and clearly as I can: thank you!

In the same vein, allow me to briefly thank a few people specifically. Stick around for it, because you’ll want to read the bit at the end where I discuss possible future books.

Thanks to my primary beta reader, whose anonymity has been a carefully guarded secret ever since “Curse of the Gatekeeper”, but whose enthusiasm, attention to detail, and pure love of story has provided the daily fuel I needed to keep these stories going even when my own enthusiasm failed.

Thanks to the Grotto Faithful (my longstanding friends at the Grotto Keep forum) for their painstaking editorial and continuity assistance throughout the daily chapter release, allowing me to make the final book release as coherent and professional as possible.

A special extra thanks to everyone who bought me coffees in thanks for the stories-- caffeine is the fuel for the creative mind, and your gift of coffee continues even now to contribute to more stories to come! I read all of your notes, and now that I am finished with the story, will respond to as many of them in person as I can.

Monumental thanks to the original Zane, my daughter Greer (a Rose by any other name), and my longsuffering wife Jael-- my toughest

critic and most ardent cheerleader, without whose encouragement I never would have released the first James Potter book, much less all the others.

Finally, thanks to a few literary inspirations:

--Ms. J. K. Rowling herself, as always, whose imagination cultivated a garden lush enough to allow even these stories to grow and thrive.

--C. S. Lewis, whose works formed the inspiration for my own Merlinus Ambrosius, as well as many other elements, including the Progressive Element, the travelling rings, and a thousand tiny details and themes. As has been mentioned elsewhere, the ending of "James Potter and the Hall of Elders' Crossing" is an intentional retelling of Lewis' brilliant conclusion to "That Hideous Strength". If you have not read that, or the rest of his mind-blowingly spectacular Space Trilogy (starting with "Out of the Silent Planet") then put this down immediately and go read it this very moment.

--All of the wonderful, whimsical, wacky English authors who've provided me with such endless amusement and inspiration, including (but not limited to) P. G. Wodehouse, H. G. Wells, Terry Pratchett, and Douglas Adams.

And now, we come to (drumroll!)... *the rest of the story.*

I get asked every day how many James Potter stories there will be. Seven, like the original Harry Potter series? More? Less?

I really want to answer that question. Not just for you, Dear Reader, but for myself! Unfortunately, I simply can't. All I can say is that I *want* to write at least seven. Not just because that's the way book series seem to go-- they either run in threes, sevens, or umpteens-- but because that's what I would want if I was reading the stories myself. Seven is a good number for a book series.

And there really is a lot more story to go.

Admittedly, with the conclusion of "Morrigan Web", a lot of it is wrapped up. The Sister Fates are broken, weakening Judith and freeing Petra and Izzy. Merlin's back. James and Petra are, if not "together", at least willingly (and in James' case eagerly) connected.

And yet...

The Vow of Secrecy is still hanging by a thread. The wizarding and Muggle worlds are trembling on the verge of complete clash...

The Vault of Destinies is still frozen, causing fate to spin further and further into chaos as destinies merge, fracture, and collapse, all

James Potter and the Morrigan Web

because the Crimson Thread-- now in the form of Petra herself-- remains plucked from another dimension...

And what of James and Petra? Now that they have acknowledged the first, subtle step toward a relationship, how will they move forward knowing that Petra's destiny is to leave our dimension forever-- and James' destiny is to help her?

And perhaps most mysterious of all, will James' dream of the graveyard-- of Petra and Albus and the Dark Mark-- ever come true? What were the words he wrote to commemorate that dream? How will it all fit together in the final pages of the final book?

The Megaplot-- the deeper story arc that runs through all the James Potter books-- is still very thick. There is much to see and do before the final end.

And I know how that end will happen. I have known it almost from the beginning. I know if Petra and James end up together. I know what the dream means. I know who lives, and who doesn't. I know if cousin Lucy will ever appear again...

But the stories are hard, hard work. Enjoyable work, I admit, but work nonetheless, and I do, unfortunately, have the very consuming "day job". And it is for that very prosaic reason that I simply cannot promise any more James Potter books.

Not even one more.

That's not to say I won't write the next book (it will be called "James Potter and the Crimson Thread" if I do). It's just to say that I can't promise it, as much as I want to. Only time will tell.

In the meantime, keep the encouraging notes and comments coming. Stay tuned at the Grotto Keep forum, the James Potter Facebook page, and my Goodreads.com author page for ongoing information, details and news.

And (ahem!) if any of you know any people at Warner Bros. or Scholastic Books, then sure, send along a recommendation about the James Potter books. You just never know what could happen...

George Norman Lippert
St. Louis, August, 2013